**It’s How You Start: Designing Initial Class Experiences for Lasting Impact**

Abstract:

We know that a positive first experience can set the tone for success, but have you thought about how you start your class and what it means for student perceptions, learning, and lasting impact? We will explore this question in this highly interactive session. Attendees will see how standing around and dead fish can create a classroom culture for engagement and social adjustment. After participating in two exercises, participants will engage in a brief reflective exercise to develop their own initial exercises. The session will conclude with a discussion of experienced outcomes, challenges, and engaging students in unique environments.

Keywords: First Impressions, Culture, Engagement

**Type of Session:** Symposium/Presentations of best practices in management education

**Conference Topics and Themes:** Learning strategies, environments, and innovations.

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**Introduction**.

The start of a new semester provides opportunity and challenges. Similar to starting a new job, students start their classes with little knowledge of their new boss/professor, and knowing few, if any, of their fellow co-workers/classmates. Social psychologists suggest that individuals excel at judging new individuals and environments quickly, including judging the competence and warmth of a person, and these impressions can guide subsequent behaviors within these environments (Bar, Neta & Linz, 2006; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002), making how we begin our classes important to setting student’s attitudes towards our courses and engagement in the course material. To engage our students and cultivate an environment for success, how we begin our classes can set the stage for students to see our classes as threats or learning opportunities. The proposed session explores how to use the start of a class to promote engagement and belongingness. Session participants will experience two activities used by the facilitators to enhance their courses; then help participants develop their own initial class activities. The session will conclude with a discussion of outcomes, benefits, and challenges in using initial common experiences and socialization activities to enhance student engagement and learning.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**.

This session brings together organizational socialization research and higher education engagement models. Organizational socialization research explores the tactics organizations use to assist newcomers to an organization adjust to their roles and the impact of these activities on workplace outcomes. Socialization researchers define newcomer adjustment using a tripartite model of role clarity and the resolution of role demands, task mastery, and adjustment to one’s group or social acceptance (Feldman, 1981). Bauer et al. (2007) in a meta-analysis of 70 prior studies, found positive correlations among organizational socialization tactics, newcomer adjustment, and a host of workplace outcomes, including performance, organizational commitment, and intentions to remain with the organizations. The three aspects of newcomer adjustment are not only important for work success, but also important for students for success in their academic pursuits and should align to positive educational outcomes.

In the higher education literature, there is an extensive stream of research of how initial common experiences and other socialization activities at a college or university level positively affect sense of belongingness, student achievement, engagement, and persistence (Hausmann, Scholfield, & Woods, 2007; Tinto, 1975; Gasiewski et al. 2012; Kuh et al. 2008). However, this research explores socialization activities and outcomes at a college or university level, not achievement, engagement, and persistence at an individual course level. We hope to fill this gap, by offering examples and beginning a discussion on how individual instructors can design initial classroom experiences to engage students and improve student learning.

Bringing these two areas of research together, we believe having initial class activities are important to set initial expectations for the course and positive initial impressions about the instructor. In addition to these benefits, beginning exercises that have a clear goal that is aligned to the instructor’s goals for the course should promote students’ self-efficacy and social adjustment in addition to maximizing students’ engagement in the course. We will briefly review the organization and higher education socialization research in the introduction to this session and refer to it when working with participants in developing their own initial course activities and in session discussions.

**General Discussion Overview**.

The two exercises being presented in this session were developed by the facilitators to address specific concerns related to student engagement and a desire to create impact and experiences that lasted beyond a single course. In telling the stories behind the exercises, in addition to having session participants experience the exercises, we hope participants will examine how they can create their own initial experiences to create positive first impressions as well as engagement throughout their courses, and impact that goes well beyond the end of the course. What we hope participants will take away from the session is the significance of using the start of a class as an opportunity for setting the class culture and in designing course activities, the importance of being authentic to the instructor’s teaching philosophy and priorities for the course to create lasting impact.

**Session Description.**

The following is a summary of the proposed session:

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| **Activity** | **Time** |
| Introduction of Facilitators and Session | 10 Minutes |
| Presentation of two examples of starting a class for lasting impact   * Example of an initial course activity for impact * Example of an activity to start each class | 40 minutes |
| Idea exchange on developing starting class activities | 20 minutes |
| Discussion of outcomes, challenges, and unique environments (online, large classes, etc.) | 15 minutes |
| Wrap Up & Closing | 5 minutes |
| **Total Time** | **90 Minutes** |

The following is an overview of the activities that will occur throughout the session:

Introduction of facilitators and session

The session will begin with a brief introduction of the facilitators and the session. The facilitators have both developed impactful course activities to set a culture in their courses that aligns with their teaching philosophies and goals for their classes.

Presentation of Two Examples of Starting a Class for Lasting Impact

Each facilitator will spend approximately twenty minutes each engaging session participants in activities developed for their classes. The first facilitator will lead participants in a dynamic activity that is used in the first class of a survey undergraduate organizational behavior course. The facilitator uses the activity to set the culture of the course and engage students in the subject matter. The second facilitator will lead participants in a networking exercise he uses at the start of each class to engage students. The facilitator developed the activity to ensure desired student outcomes and address potential disengagement among students.

Idea exchange on developing starting class activities

After having participants experience the activities, the facilitators will work participants through a brief reflection exercise to help instructors develop their own introductory exercise. Participants will be asked to review their own teaching philosophy, learning goals for their courses, and impact goals to develop their introductory experience. Ideas will be shared and discussed.

Discussion of outcomes, challenges, and unique environments

In this part of the session, the facilitators will discuss the outcomes they have experienced as a result of using initial common experiences and socialization activities and will invite participants to share their experiences. As time permits, we will facilitate a discussion of creating common experiences in challenging environments including large classes and online environments.

Wrap Up and Closing

We will wrap up the session by summarizing key takeaways. We are hoping participants will also gain a network of colleagues world-wide to exchange ideas on designing initial experiences to enhance courses and student outcomes.

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