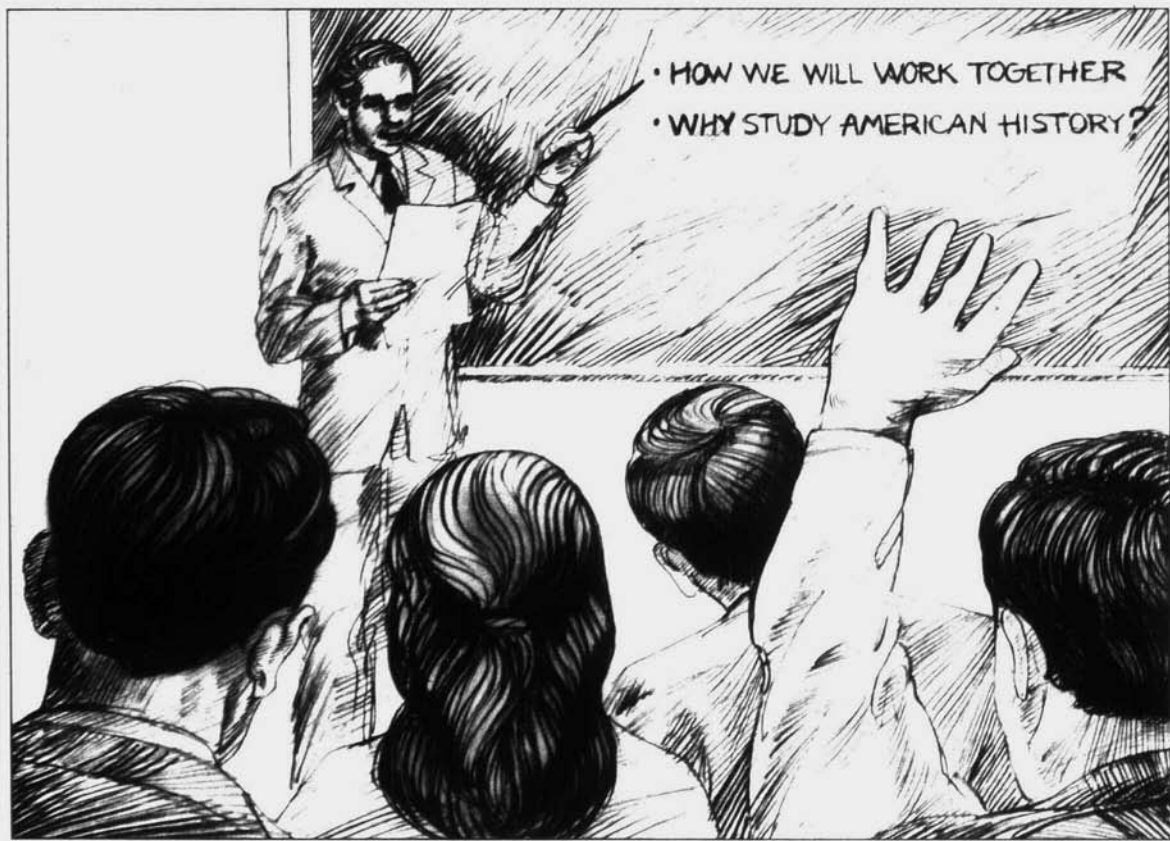


The First Day of School

Inexperienced teachers need to know how to bring the class to order quickly, explain rules and procedures, find out important information about the students, and let them know what to expect in the coming days.

Classroom teachers have always been concerned with the important first weeks of school. We investigated the *first day* of school at the junior high level by videotaping and comparing first-year "brand new" teachers with veteran "superstar" teachers during their first, second, tenth, and 28th days of school. The resulting videotapes, teacher interviews, and student interviews have left us with a profile of successful junior high school teachers and one dramatic



"A successful first day of school can literally set the stage for a successful school year."

conclusion: a successful first day of school can literally set the stage for a successful school year.

Here's what we discovered about students' needs, and how the superstars go about meeting them.

Student Needs

Adolescent students come to school with specific first-day needs. They want to know, in sequence:

1. Are they in the right room?
2. Where are they supposed to sit?
3. What are the rules of this teacher?
4. What will they be doing in the course?
5. How will they be evaluated?
6. Who is the teacher as a person?
7. Is the teacher going to be interested in them as individuals?

High-ability students are more interested in the grading practices of the teacher, while low-ability students want to know about the teacher's personality and how the teacher will treat them.

Superstar Activities

Superstar teachers have a simple formula for effectively beginning the school year. This formula includes their selection of activities, the sequence of these activities, and their behavior within the activities they select. Specifically, they (1) select activities that let them meet student needs, as well as their own; (2) sequence the activities to meet first needs first; and (3) adjust their verbal and nonverbal behaviors within each activity, consistent with the message they are trying to communicate.

We recommend the following selection and sequence of first-day teacher activities:

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1. Call the class to order when the bell rings.

2. Take roll, organize seating, and establish a seating chart at the same time.

3. Explain classroom rules and procedures.

4. Introduce the course content and grading procedures.

5. Solicit student autobiographical information on 3x5 cards.

6. Talk about yourself, your school experiences, and so forth.

7. Close with a preview of what materials will be needed the next day and what the content will cover.

8. Dismiss the class at the bell.

Most important is the explanation of rules and procedures. If the rules are not reviewed or are confusing, ambiguous, or irrelevant, the consequences can be serious. Five categories of rules are important:

1. *Entry*—Be in your seat when the bell rings.

2. *Interactive*—Raise your hand to talk with the teacher.

3. *Attention*—Don't talk while the teacher is talking.

4. *Exit*—The teacher, not the bell, dismisses you.

5. *Classroom*—Specific rules for sharpening pencils, bathroom, equipment, gum, and so forth.

The method of presenting rules to the class is also important. Explain them using a particular sequence:

1. State the rule (to communicate that it is important enough to talk about).

2. Provide a student-centered rationale for the rule (to communicate that the rule is for them as well as you).

3. Explain the consequences of breaking the rule (to communicate accountability).

4. Give a good example of what the infraction looks like (to demonstrate

that you know what you're talking about).

The superstar teachers in our studies shared common practices. They began their classes in a businesslike manner. They checked roll and established seating charts at the same time (overlapping). They minimized the frequency and length of transitions between activities (lag time). They were deliberate and no-nonsense in their explanations of rules and procedures, but smiled when talking about course content and projects. The old adage "Don't smile 'till Christmas" could probably be modified to "Don't smile during rules and procedures." The superstars maintained direct eye contact with the entire class (scanning). They didn't play name games to acquaint students with one another. Instead, they simply began calling out students' names from the seating charts for questions and answers. The students learned each others' names by listening. We didn't observe any public self-disclosures from students in these teachers' classrooms (such as, "What I did on my summer vacation").

Not-So-Superstar Activities

The less successful teachers in our studies also shared common practices. They were slow to begin their classes with any call to order. There was no evidence of "overlapping"; thus everything took longer and less was accomplished. The number of transitions was much higher and they lasted longer, thus providing more opportunities for student disruption. These teachers were less clear and persuasive when presenting rules. They used fewer rationales for the rules and spent more time just listing them. Their choices of activities were often questionable. One math teacher had her 8th grade students spend 15 minutes drawing self-portraits! These teachers tended to

play name games, quickly resulting in student misbehavior. This preoccupation with individual students dramatically reduced the amount of time these teachers spent scanning the entire class. One teacher smiled only when she explained the consequences for misbehavior, and at no other time during the session! These teachers struggled with their classes the entire year.

In summary, good school years begin with well-planned and executed first days that permit the teacher to establish a cooperative learning environment and permit the students to find out what is expected in the classroom. Effective first-day procedures meet teacher and student needs and increase the likelihood of an effective second day.

Supervising the First-Year Teacher

While some first-year teachers may be able to start off the year—and their

careers—on the right foot, many need help. The following is a six-step process that can put your videotape equipment to good use in helping your superstars help other teachers on the staff.

1. Develop a bank of first-day videotapes at each grade level. Successful, experienced classroom managers should be invited to participate. Videotape their first and second days of class. In our studies, we also taped the tenth and 28th days of superstar teachers.

2. Review the tapes with the experienced teachers to identify activity units and transitions.

3. Create audiotapes to accompany the videotapes. Play the tapes while the experienced teachers are watching them a second time. Ask the teachers to discuss why they chose and sequenced the activities and behaved as they did. In short, have the teachers think out loud on the audiotapes.

4. Create a beginning teacher staff development day during inservice week, featuring grade-level first-day experts explaining, with videotapes, how they get their school year started. The session should result in activity-specific recommendations for improved classroom management.

5. Supervise first-year teachers more frequently during the first few weeks of instruction. New teachers don't always recognize the early warning signs of management problems. For example, new teachers often don't know when *some* student noise is *too much* student noise because they haven't experienced the consequence, in May, of *some* noise in September.

6. Supervise contextually. Observe how the new teachers open their classes, introduce expectations, manage transitions between activities, respond to disruptions, and end the class. Recommendations on *when to behave* in certain ways are always easier to follow than simply being told how to behave. A poor opening activity could explain serious problems later this class session. A poor first day could explain serious problems later in the school year. □

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