



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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New Students, New Semester: How to Remember Names and Faces

It's the first day of a new semester. In addition to the enthusiasm and optimism inherent in new beginnings, we as teachers also must confront a humbling task: how to learn the names and faces of the 20 to 40 unfamiliar students expectantly sitting before us.

And we must learn them quickly! In teaching, as in so many other fields, first impressions count for much. Before becoming teachers, all of us were students; we learned, if only subconsciously, that teachers who were slow in learning the names of their students tended to be uninspired and uninspiring. Although we certainly don't want our students to come to that harsh prejudice of us, we are only human. Almost all of us find it difficult to put together names with the faces of so many new people in short order. The only individuals who seem to succeed, apart from professional memory trainers and sales representatives, are politicians.

Actually, there is a technique that can reliably be used to associate the names and faces of at least 75% of a typical first day class size of 20-40 new students. Even better, skillful use (i.e., the right amount of showmanship) of this technique can leave the impression that you have gotten to know almost all the students' names and faces by the start of the second class meeting.

STEP 1

Before coming to class, read the class roster several times. Focus on the last names and honorifics (Mr./Ms.). Memorize as many of them as you can.

By familiarizing ourselves with the names beforehand, we set up a kind of cognitive dissonance: If we know there is a Jones in the class, then we can concentrate on looking for Jones and remembering what he or she looks like. Under this procedure, paradoxically, students with unusual names become easier to remember. At this point there is no need to focus on the first, or given names. That just increases memory burden without yielding important initial benefits.

STEP 2

Start the class by introducing yourself and describing your background and expectations for the course. Conclude by saying that you would like to learn more about them, but there isn't time for everyone to be as longwinded as you've been. Hand out a "Student Expectations Survey" that asks for a name, address, and phone number(s), and includes an open-ended essay question about backgrounds and expectations. Allow students at least 15 minutes of writing time.

While the students are busy writing, take the opportunity to study their faces, clothing styles, posture, haircuts—anything, in short, that you can use to personalize the individual student. This visual information also sets up a cognitive dissonance: you'll certainly want to learn the name of the punk rocker with the purple hair. (The writing exercise is not only a chance to study the physiognomy of your students, but is also a way of taking attendance and gauging the overall intellectual potential and interests of your new class.)

STEP 3

In addition to absorbing the "tableau" of visual information presented by individual students, set up a mnemonic positional framework. For example, in a traditional classroom layout, call the first row on your left "A," the second row, "B," and so on. Similarly, call the first student in row "A," 1; the second, 2, etc. Modify this positional framework to fit various possible seating arrangements.

This framework is the heart of the technique presented. It relies on a curious fact of student sociobiology: students almost invariably return to the same seat they occupied during the first class, or in reasonable proximity. For example, students who choose to sit in the back of the room on the first day will almost never voluntarily change their seat to the front, and vice versa. Students who seem to prefer quick access to the door will sooner die than sit over by the windows, and vice versa.



STEP 4

Collect the student papers. Then, starting with position "A1," ask the students to introduce themselves and say a few words about themselves and their expectations for the course.

Again, this step, like the preceding ones, is not very different from ordinary classroom practice and sound group leadership. But it does set up the next step.

STEP 5

While listening as carefully as possible to what student "A1" is saying, find the name on the class roster and code "A1" next to it. (Obviously, if the student is not on the roster, write in the name and the code.) If you have memorized or nearly memorized the set of names, and have carefully studied the faces and appearances of your students, then the positional code will serve as the link or index between names and faces!

At first glance, Step 5 appears to be the result of cross-pollinating cognitive psychology with an electronic spreadsheet like LOTUS 1-2-3. Despite the resemblance, it isn't. You might be surprised to learn that the technique described above is virtually identical to the method used by ancient orators like Cicero to deliver complex orations without reading them to their audiences. (For more information on the techniques, consult any scholarly work on ancient oratory, particularly Frances Yates.)

STEP 6.

As soon as you can after class, read the "Student Expectations Surveys," covering up the name of the student. Attempt to remember the name, based on your recollections of what students said in class about themselves. Refer to your class roster and position-code the "Student Expectations Survey" so that you can "triangulate" if necessary.

This step provides additional reinforcement of the links between names, faces, and places.

STEP 7

Before the second class meeting, review the surnames and honorifics of the students on the class roster. Reread the "Surveys" and attempt to recollect names, faces, places.

By this point, the majority of the names, faces, and places should be almost committed to memory. And if during the second class you don't mind using the roster with positional codes as a kind of crib sheet—well, you can make it seem as though you know more

names and faces than you really do. In fact, with the right amount of showmanship, you can appear to be a close relative of the "Amazing Kreskin."

Conclusions

Make no mistake: this technique does require a certain amount of work. Like anything else, practice makes it easier and easier to apply. But is it worth the effort?

There is no doubt, in my mind at least, that "the pain is worth the gain." In my own career as a student, I remember that my best teachers always seemed to take some extra effort to learn—and use—students' names as quickly as possible. The worst (i.e., graduate assistants in large undergraduate lecture courses) never bothered. Teachers cannot claim to be concerned about how well their students learn, if they themselves do not try as hard as they can to show they care about one of the most important possessions anyone can have in a mass civilization: a face and a name.

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