

Tips and Tricks for the First Week(s) of Class

Check Out the Room & Imagine the Space

- What is the set up? How can you alter it to meet your needs?
- What are the limitations? Contact your divisional manager for markers, erasers, and other tools. Contact IT (yncit@yale-nus.edu.sg) for technological assistance and Infrastructure (infra@yale-nus.edu.sg) for repairs to the physical space.
- **What are the possibilities? Consider how different configurations could achieve your teaching goals, foster the kind of participation and discussion you want, amplify student learning.**
- Where will you stand or sit and how will that impact course dynamics? How might your positioning generate more hierarchical versus egalitarian participation norms. Which is more desirable given your course goals, classroom diversity, and desired persona?
- **How will the use or non-use of laptops disrupt or facilitate course goals in this space?**

Communicate Course Goals and Prepare to Answer Common Questions

- Share your syllabus with course timing, location, and required materials.
- Prime students with your expectations, course goals, and expected learning outcomes.
- Help students plan for a successful semester by providing paper, exam, and assignment timelines.
- Communicate participation and attendance standards, grading policies, and expected behaviours.
- Anticipate student questions and find answers: students may want you to add them to the roster, to know add-drop deadlines, prerequisites, etc. **Many of these questions can be answered on the faculty portal (faculty.yale-nus.edu.sg) under 'Registry' and 'Teaching and Learning.'**
- For syllabus template and other tools visit: <https://teaching.yale-nus.edu.sg/our-services/course-design/>

Anticipate Student Expectations and Needs

- Given our highly diverse student population, what additional steps can you take to craft and communicate course goals? Consider how this population might differ in their prior experiences and expectations from students you have taught elsewhere. How might you capitalize on the Common Curriculum experiences? What can you do to ease the transition for yourself and for your students?
- **Are there forms of 'common knowledge' in your own cultural context which might need to be made more explicit in a diverse classroom?**
- Consider what you want to know about your students' prior experiences, comfort zones, and background in order to plan the course. How can you solicit that information early in the semester (e.g. through ice-breaker activities, by asking them to fill in a questionnaire either anonymously or openly, through some ungraded skills assessment)?

Plan Your Persona, Formality, and Accessibility

- How you dress, what you say, and your general manner on the first day will set a tone for the semester. Making these choices deliberately will help establish your desired rapport with students. Decide what kind of persona you feel comfortable with and what kind of authority you want to project in the classroom. From there you can make choices about how to introduce yourself and

dress on the first day, what norms to communicate about email and in-person contact, and generally how to present yourself to your new students.

- It is generally easier to open up access, or move from formality to informality, over the semester than the reverse. You may want to set a more formal tone at the beginning even if you intend to loosen up later in the term.
- Anticipate and communicate boundaries that are important for you as a professional (e.g. if you know you do not check or respond to emails over the weekend communicate that upfront so students can plan accordingly).

THE FIRST DAYS OF CLASS:

Fight Butterflies with Preparation

- Have all print outs and materials ready the day before, especially if you are new to this campus and technology.
- Arrive early, arrange chairs, write relevant course information on the board or on slides
- Upload slides to the course Canvas sight in advance if that is inline with your teaching approach
- Greet students as they arrive to help you learn names, project confidence, and establish rapport.

Model Desired Course Dynamics and Practices

- **Whatever behaviours you expect, or activities you plan to emphasize, during the semester, start doing it on the first day of class.** E.g. If punctuality is important to you, start the first class on time to set the tone for subsequent weeks. If you want them to talk to each other, and not only to you, insist they learn each other's names and direct comments to each other on the first day.
- It can be tempting to spend the entirety of the first class reading through the syllabus and explaining administrative details. If you expect the course to run on student participation and initiative, try to have them participate in discussion during the first day to establish firmly that they need to contribute actively to the course.
- If during break-out groups or in seating patterns you notice student self-segregation by cohort, sex, ethnicity, or other factors, and *if you feel comfortable doing so*, consider asking students to reorganize themselves. Alternatively, consider assigned but rotating groups or seating assignments.

Get Students Excited and Organized

- Link an introductory ice breaker to course material. **Instead of asking the traditional questions (name, class year, hometown) consider asking students to share a fun fact, an opinion, or an aspiration linked the course material.** (E.g. in an art history class ask them to share what artist they would choose to paint their portrait and why). Or have them propose and ask the class questions about each other and of you.
- The beginning of a course can get bogged down with administrative detail. Try to make room in the first class to teach students something interesting they did not know before or to raise a particularly controversial aspect of the course material.
- Highlight deadlines and other key items so students can get organized and employ effective time management habits. Clarify the assignment or deliverable expected for the next class meeting.

Help Students Help Themselves Succeed

- Many students will be too shy or ashamed to admit feeling lost, confused, or overwhelmed by new material. Develop ways authentic to you to assure them these reactions are a normal part of learning, and guide them in strategies to overcome these obstacles (asking for peer support, faculty office hours, Writer's Center, Vice Rectors, peer tutoring programs, etc.). Explicitly communicate that you are committed to helping students succeed.

- **Communicate what you expect students to do when they are feeling lost (or insufficiently challenged), and what they can (and cannot) expect from you when they ask for help. Many students may have had an easy time succeeding in school before entering college, and do not know how to handle setbacks.** Give them explicit suggestions for succeeding in your class (e.g. attending office hours, close reading techniques, drafting, keeping up with current events).
- Hang around after class to talk to students with special concerns or needs, who often will not feel comfortable asking their questions in front of peers.

Solicit Feedback

- **Mid-semester feedback is great, but it can be helpful to solicit feedback even earlier. Consider prompting students to submit anonymous comments through Canvas, or write for two minutes on their main ‘take-away’ lessons at the end of each class for an ungraded ‘check-in’ submission (this also helps them consolidate knowledge).**
- When you get a particularly quiet group, it can be hard to decipher what students are thinking – are they tired, hungry, completely confused? If you are struggling to get participation, consider doing an occasional pulse check, asking students to go around the room and share a word that captures their current thinking or feeling. This can help you know what is happening and forces them to wake up, self-reflect, and engage.
- **Call out and investigate troubling behaviour.** If students seem particularly quiet, or particularly resistant, ask what is driving that behaviour. It can be a valuable long-term investment to dialogue about problematic classroom dynamics early in the term.

Establish Baseline Knowledge and Motivations

- **If you want to be able to measure and assess student learning in your class, you may want to do some in-take assessments** to measure students skill and knowledge before starting your course, which you can later compare with skill and knowledge development at the end of the semester. This can be done in group conversation, one-on-one conversations, or anonymous survey.
- **Understanding students’ prior knowledge and their reasons for taking the course can help you revise your syllabus now that you know who is taking your class.** For example, if you were expecting high prior knowledge, but your students generally have low prior knowledge, you may want to revise the syllabus. Additionally, framing readings and discussion topics around student motivations may prompt them to work harder and learn more.

Resources:

Marilla Svinicki and Wilbert McKeachie, *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (copies on the CTL Bookshelf)

University of Virginia, Center for Teaching Excellence, <http://cte.virginia.edu/resources/teaching-the-first-days/>

Carnegie Mellon University, Center for Teaching Excellence and Education Innovation, <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/firstday.html>

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Center for Faculty Excellence, <http://cfe.unc.edu/teaching-and-learning/>

Washington University in St. Louis, The Teaching Center, <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/>