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Students’ Perspectives on the First Day of Class: A Replication

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Abstract
Research has shown that first-day practices affect students’ motivation, grades, and end of the semester ratings of the professors. However, research on student preferences of first day practices has been conducted at public, predominantly white institutions and has not investigated if first day preferences differ at a private or historically Black university. Therefore, to investigate consistency in preferences across generations and possible differences in preferences at a private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) we assessed first day preferences and compared our results to the original study (Perlman & McCann, 1999). We sampled 230 predominantly Black students from a small private HBCU. Our findings are similar to Perlman and McCann’s results, indicating that students desire a general overview, details about grading, and getting to know the professor. Students also disliked poor use of class time and beginning course material on the first day. Analyses revealed differences in the preferences of third and fourth year students compared to first and second year students. Analyses also indicated that in our sample a smaller proportion of students cared about first day information being presented in an understandable contest, and that a higher proportion of our sample cared about setting a fun tone and disliked an uncaring or intimidating environment in contrast to Perlman & McCann’s original study.

Keywords
teaching; student perceptions; first day of class

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Cover Page Footnote
The researchers would like to acknowledge the contributions of Annette Iskra for her help collecting data.
INTRODUCTION

Learning is affected by situational and contextual factors influenced by societal expectations, norms, task definitions, and social cues (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980; Woodrow, 2001). Cultural norms impact individual learning strategies and learning preferences both internationally and intra-nationally. For example, Chinese students valued learning as a means of self-development and social approval significantly more than Flemish students, while Flemish students devalued conception of understanding when compared to Chinese students (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008). Another study found that Turkish students valued meaning, reproducing and strategic learning strategies more that Taiwanese students (Berberoglu & Hei, 2003). Differences like these can have profound impacts on what students prefer in a learning environment, what they attend to, and what they find most useful. Learning strategies also change within a society. In the 1960’s in the wake of the Sputnik crisis, American grade schools made a dramatic change to the math curriculum shifting the focus to abstract algebra and away from arithmetic and times tables. The method was quickly abandoned because it was not in line with the cultural norms at the time (Feynman, 1965). Therefore, it is necessary to include temporal and cultural variety in our investigations of teaching strategies.

Research has identified various teaching strategies that optimize student learning and facilitate the understanding and retention of information (Tomcho et al., 2008). In western contexts, teaching approaches that encourage active engagement with the material, as well as critical thinking and evaluation are known to exert a positive impact on learning outcomes (Butler, Phillmann, & Smart, 2001; Freeman et al., 2007; O’Sullivan & Copper, 2003; Prince & Felder, 2006; Sivan, Wong Leung, Woon, & Kember, 2000; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005). The foundation for these teaching approaches is often established on the first day of class and has been shown to affect the classroom environment, morale, and grades (Herman, Foster, & Hardin, 2010; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). In addition, research has identified specific first-day practices that provide benefits. For instance, students who have been exposed to an effective icebreaker, compared to no icebreaker, reported greater satisfaction with the course, and deem the course a more valuable learning experience (Herman et al.). In a related study, Wilson and Wilson found that students who experienced a positive first day (learned about the course, grading standards and work required), compared to a negative first day (beginning course material, using the entire class time, and assigning homework), had more positive perceptions of the professor, were more motivated in the course, and had higher end-of-course grades.

Other research indicates that impressions on the first day may contribute to impressions later in the semester. Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) found a positive correlation between end-of-the-semester ratings and ratings after viewing thirty-second, fifteen-second, and six-second nonverbal clips of professors and high school teachers teaching. In the experiment students and adults who had no contact with the professor rated the very short (6s, 15s, or 30s) silent videos of the professors and teachers teaching on a number of behaviors (e.g. accepting, competent, attentive, supportive, etc.). They found that ratings by strangers (adults who had no face to face contact with the professor) and students who had not yet taken the course correlated with students’ end of semester ratings. Given these findings, understanding student impressions on the first day of class has broad implications for teaching practices and student success.

To date, three studies have explored students’ first-day-of-class preferences (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006; Perlman, & McCann, 1999). Perlman and McCann sampled 570 psychology students attending a regional public university in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. They asked students two questions: (a) what are the most useful things a faculty member can do during a first class meeting, and (b) what are your pet peeves about what faculty do during a first class meeting. They found that students reported liking a general course overview both verbally and in a detailed syllabus (72%), wanted information about the specifics of the class (exams, assignments, how to get a good grade, 26%), and liked when the instructors explained their background and teaching style (18%). Students also reported liking instructors who were accessible, approachable, and supportive (7%), relaxed (5%), and fun (4%). Student pet peeves on the first

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Black schools state they receive the help and support needed to begin class than open ended questions. Finally, there was no study was not calculated. Also, it is possible that the Likert.

Furthermore, the type of university may influence student perspectives. Research on the impact of faculty and students' concerns about the first day of class and the importance of specific first-day activities was the subject of the Perlman and McCann (1999) study.

The department of psychology at a private historically Black liberal arts college collected data from students on the first day of the Spring 2013 semester. The ethical implication of the study were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board. Six faculty members and 110 of them were trained in order to develop the survey. The inclusion criteria were: the ability to communicate in English, completion of at least one course at the undergraduate psychology classes (total classes sampled = 23). Participants were 230 undergraduate students, 63 were first-years, 79 were second years, 43 were third years, and 45 were fourth years. All students attended an orientation meeting in the first week of college. Generally, the students are considered first-years when they have 0 to 29 credits, second years have 30 to 59 credits, third year members participated by collecting information from all of their students. Minority students have accumulated 60 to 89 hours of college credit and have 0 to 29 credits, second years have 30 to 59 credits, third year have 60 to 89 hours of college credit and have 0 to 29 credits, and fourth years have 90 or more credits (Baker, 2016).

Participants
Participants were handed a notecard and the following instructions prior to the start of class:

Faculty in the Psychology Department are interested in maintaining and improving their teaching. To that end we are interested in the first day of class of a course, what works well and what does not. If you have already done this exercise in a psychology class, or do not want to volunteer, leave the card blank. Label this index card Side A and Side B. On card A put your standing class (first year, sophomore, junior, or senior), and gender (male or female) and indicate what you found as the most useful things a faculty member can do during a first day class meeting! Please list these on Side A. Based on your experiences as a student, what are your pet peeves about faculty doing during a first day class meeting? Please list these on Side B.

The two independent researchers tabulated information from the surveys. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved. If a statement qualified for two different categories, it was only counted in one.

RESULTS
Three categories of student responses organized into the same categories deemed important to the first day of class by Perlman and McCann (1999). Students listed responses about what is a good practice on the first day of class and what constitutes a pet peeve on the first day of class.

What works well. Students preferred a general overview of the course or syllabus (69.1%). They wanted teachers to specifically describe different class rules and procedures, and to have a clear background and teaching style was listed as a useful first-class practice by 23.9% of students. Finally, students listed that teachers who set a tone that was fun (9.1%) accessible, and supportive (5.6%), or comfortably relaxed (3.1%), worked best.

Pet Peeves. Student pet peeves on the first day of class included poor use of class time (35.2%), beginning with course content (just stating content, not teaching), poor teaching (9.1%), or a homework assignment (8.7%). A greater number of students listed icebreakers as a pet peeve (15.2%) than a desirable first practice (5.6%).

The results from the forced choice items indicate that students who attend private colleges are more likely than public college counterparts to value faculty that challenge their students, and that private college faculty were more likely than public college counterparts to value faculty that challenge their students and work hard to create a meaningful learning environment.

Instructor uncaring, intimidating (9.6%) the students.

TABLE 1. The First Day of Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Works Well</th>
<th>Works Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General overview, syllabus, nature and content, requirements, expectations</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory self (background, teaching style) to students</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First day content is put in context and understandable, without having an assignment</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes why students should take the course and how they may profit from it</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets tone of being accessible, supportive and respectful</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacts</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets full hour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets relaxed, comfortable tone</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets a fun tone</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begins the class content (lectures)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor use of class time (non-essential information, read syllabus, unorganized)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor uninteresting, mannerless</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor teaching (listens to, listens to, listens to, too fast, too much monologue)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-squared analysis was also calculated to identify meaningful differences between the Perlman and McCann's study and our replication. To do this analysis we compared listed and unlified frequencies of the first day of class. The proportion of students who listed what works well for the two studies were compared using the Pearson’s chi-squared, it was found that a smaller proportion of students (13%) listed that the first day content is in context and is understandable without having an assignment compared to the Perlman and McCann’s students (75%) \( \chi^2 \) (1, N = 800) = 21.968, \( p = .000, \Phi = .16 \). None of the students in our sample listed monotone, talks too fast, too much material as a desirable first day practice (5.6%).

Chi-squared analysis compared listed and unlified frequencies of the first and second year students (under-class) to third and fourth year students (upper-class). There were no significant differences between under- and upper-class students on what they thought worked well on the first day of class. Our \( \Phi \) (listed, unlited) \( X^2 \) (under-class, upper-class) chi-square analysis of pet peeves identified that a greater percentage of upper-class students (41%) listed poor use of class time as a pet peeve than under-class students (28%) \( \chi^2 \) (1, N = 230) = 6.547, \( p = .011, \Phi = .17 \). We also found that underclass students listed uncaring (32%) as a pet peeve more often than upper-class students (10%) \( \chi^2 \) (1, N = 230) = 5.619, \( p = .021, \Phi = .16 \).

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In our sample, an uncaring or intimidating instructor ranked the third most common pet peeve. In addition, the proportion of students expressing this concern for instructors who were rated higher in our sample than in the original study. As mentioned in the introduction, students who attend Historically Black College or University (HBCUs)’ (76% African American) do so in part because students are interested in the structure and required coursework such as learning in the professor’s grading standards and the amount of work that will be required in the courses. Students in our study may be aware that an enthusiastic (or ‘fun’) professor may help in improving their learning throughout the semester. Therefore, our divergent findings may be highlighting a preference for students in our study versus the general population. We also found that first and second year students listed an uncaring professor as a pet peeve significantly more than third and fourth year students and that third and fourth year students listed personal contact and rapport fewer than first year students. The difference in preferences by class likely reflects the different needs of upper- and under-class students.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of proximal development highlights the importance of providing students with scaffolding (enough information) to solve the problem. As students develop they need less and less scaffolding and can rely more heavily on their own skills to acquire, and synthesize information. Appleby (2007) adapted Vygotsky’s theory to reflect stages of development in psychology college students. What she explains easily is that early in the process the instructor is the main source of information and students are mastering learning and prioritizing the importance of information. As students progress, the main source of information is primary sources and the goal of the instructor has shifted to the help students assess the quality of the article. Therefore, having a caring instructor may be more important for underclass students who have not established a source of information and making good use of class time might be more important at later stages in college because students are instructed to prioritize immediate gains for knowledge.

Finally, significantly more of our students listed icebreakers and poor teaching as pet peeves than students in the original study. Opinions on icebreakers are polarized, some suggest it is a good way to get to know students. Noting that poor teaching results in students dropping out, and others indicate icebreakers are not preferable (Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman and McCann, 2006). Perlman and McCann themselves found that underclassmen need icebreakers but upperclassmen did not (1999). Other research has indicated that it really depends what type of icebreaker you use. Case, Bartsh, McEnery, Hall, Hermann, and Foster (2008) found that students enjoy the reciprocal interview approach and suggest Freyman, R. P. (1965). New textbooks for the “New” mathematics. Engineering and Science, 28, 277-279. doi: 10.1207/s15323757EES090202

Acknowledgments

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