January 2017

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

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110105
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Abstract
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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.
Students’ Perspectives on the First Day of Class: A Replication

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(Received 02 November 2015; Accepted 19 August 2016)

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 context, 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.

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 & Coper, 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
the relationship between learning environments, students' interactions with teachers and peers, sense of belonging, and student success. (Messinne, Severiens, & Born, 2010). The model that best explained the variance among students was the model that described majority students. Minority students felt at home in their educational program if they had a good formal relationship with teachers and fellow students. Majority students felt they belonged only when they had relationships with fellow students. These findings are particularly interesting when coupled with the finding that feeling like one does not belong to ethnic minority students is an important predictor of their retention (Perlman & McCann, 2003). Therefore, the relationship with teachers kindled on the first day of the course may be particularly important for minority students.

Furthermore, the type of university may influence student expectations. Research on the impact of faculty and interactions on student learning and ultimately success indicate that private colleges were more likely than public colleges to have faculty that challenge their students, and that private college faculty were more likely than public college counterparts to value enriching education experiences (Johnson et al., 1998; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Taken together, this research suggests a different tone at private and public institutions that might have a direct effect on students’ first day preferences. Put another way, students at private universities may seek different experiences than those who attend public universities. Therefore, the differences in preferences for students who attend private and predominantly Black colleges and the time between the original and follow-up study we believe it is important to assess first day preferences of students at a private historically Black institution. Here we replicated Perlman and McCann’s (1999) study on first day preferences at a private historically Black college and predicted that students would describe different course content (lectures) and procedures (work well) compared to the Perlman and McCann study. We also hypothesized that students would list unearthing and intimidating as a pet peeve more often than the Perlman and McCann study.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The department of psychology at a privately 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 of the African American, reported that students attend their classes because they are more likely to receive the attention and support necessary for success (Hammer, 2011). Specifically, survey results revealed from predominantly white institutions feel outnumbered, and students from predominantly Black schools state they receive the help and support needed to succeed. These results are echoed in a large study that investigated the relationship between learning environments, students' interactions with teachers and peers, sense of belonging, and student success. (Messinne, Severiens, & Born, 2010). The model that best explained the variance among students was the model that described majority students. Minority students felt at home in their educational program if they had a good formal relationship with teachers and fellow students. Majority students felt they belonged only when they had relationships with fellow students. These findings are particularly interesting when coupled with the finding that feeling like one does not belong to ethnic minority students is an important predictor of their retention (Perlman & McCann, 2003). Therefore, the relationship with teachers kindled on the first day of the course may be particularly important for minority students.

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**TABLE 1. The First Day of Class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Works Well (%)</th>
<th>Peeves (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General overview, syllabus, course content, nature and context, requirements, expectations</td>
<td>159 (69)</td>
<td>1 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher specifically describes exams, assignments, and grading</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduces self (background, teaching style) to students</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First day content is in context and understandable without having read 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>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets tone of being approachable, accessible, and receptive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-teacher rapport, contact</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets relaxed, comfortable tone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets a fun tone</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning course content (lectures)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor use of class time (non-relevant information, read syllabus, unorganized)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor uninviting, unresponsive, unhelpful</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor teaching (nervous, monotone, talks too fast, too much repetition)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating Chart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher bias or absent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS**

The survey measures 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 exams, assignments and grading (24.5%) to 5 (%) much

What works well. Students preferred a general overview of the course or syllabus (69.1%). They wanted teachers to specifically describe exams, assignments and grading (24.5%) to 5 (%) much
In our sample, an uncaring or intimidating instructor ranked the third most common pet peeve. In addition, the proportion of students mentioning an instructor who set a fun tone was 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 they are interested in a strong, supportive, and diverse structure and required coursework such as learning the professor’s grading standards and the amount of work that will be required in the course. In both our original study and Perlman and McCann’s (2009) study, teachers interviewed about first day practices, they identified four themes: (a) communicating course expectations, (b) information on structure and content delivery, (c) procedural details like attendance, and (d) personal information about the professor or other students. In Perlman and McCann’s (1999) study, the main concerns of students at a small private historically Black university are largely consistent with findings from large and small public institutions. However, our results diverge from the original study in some important ways. In terms of student preferences on the first day of class, we found that significantly more of our students wanted a teacher who set a fun tone. The category ‘a fun tone’ originally termed by Perlman and McCann (1999) included responses from students about a classroom environment or teacher on the first day that was interesting, enjoyable, fun, exciting, enthusiastic, or appealing. Research has shown that enthusiasm is connected with classroom satisfaction, motivation, and interest (Sass, 1989). Sass asked students to list specific aspects of a recent class that was motivating and one that was not motivating. Students identified instructor enthusiasm as the most important factor motivating their enrollment, while student interest has also connected instructor enthusiasm with positive student outcomes. Kim and Schallert (2014) found that instructor and peer enthusiasm was associated with two types of student interest (sustained attention to the topic). They also measured the influence 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 is that early in the process the instructor is the main source of information and students are mastering listening, 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 help the students assess the quality of the article. Therefore, having a caring instructor may be more important than enthusiasm, but both are important. This study of interest and situational interest, cast (initial interest in the topic) and hold interest (sustained attention to the topic). They also measured the relationship between first-day and end-of-semester interest ratings among students with and without a professor. Both groups found that early in the semester, interest in the course was high, but as the semester progressed, interest in the course declined. The research has found that it really depends what type of instructor you use. Case, Barths, McInery, Hall, Hermann, and Foster (2008) found that students enjoy the reciprocal interview approach and suggest that instructors use it to improve their teaching. In the reciprocal interview approach the instructor interviews the students and then the students interview the instructor, mostly on topics related to the class like quizzes and grading policies. The reciprocal interview approach may also provide the instructor with a means to improve teaching and learning by guiding the students to do well in the class. End-of-semester ratings for professors who used the reciprocal interview approach were higher than professors who used traditional interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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