First Impressions: Why the First Day Matters

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Abstract

The first day of class, and particularly the first few minutes of the opening lecture, are a crucial time in the life of a course. It is our hope that this paper will spur instructors to try new learning methods on the first day of class and that the ideas put forth here will enliven their classes, motivate students to learn more, and set a positive tone for the remainder of the semester.

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1. Introduction

“Anyone? Anyone?” The camera pans to students with glazed over eyes and bored expressions. One blows bubblegum; another is asleep at his desk. “Anyone?” Ben Stein pleads for a student response as he drones on in his famous monotone voice about tariffs and Laffer curves during a high school economics class. As this scene from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) illustrates, economics has a (generally) well-deserved reputation for poor teaching, and this has seeped into popular culture.

More broadly, economists are seen as being embarrassingly dry. This perception was reinforced in a 2009 U.S. television commercial starring Catherine Zeta-Jones, where a group of economists in suits go door-to-door trying to sell new mobile phone coverage. People hide from them, squirt them with garden hoses, and slam doors in their faces. Then, we see Zeta-Jones approach a front door and ask the homeowner if he would like a “mobile makeover.” Startled by his good fortune, he responds, “I believe I do.” What is the lesson here? Make a positive first impression, like Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Nobel laureate, Daniel Kahneman popularized in *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011) what psychologists have long known - people form impressions almost immediately. This is especially true in the classroom, where favorable first impressions are highly correlated with positive end-of-semester course evaluations (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993; Carney, D. R., Colvin, C. R., & Hall, J. A., 2007; Laws, Eric L., Apperson, Jennifer M., Buchert, Stephanie and Bregman, Norman J., 2009; Morris, T., Gorham, J., Cohen, S., & Huffman, D., 1996). Given this evidence, we offer a number of strategies that can be deployed by instructors in economics to help create positive first impressions: playing pre-class music, learning names, using media from popular culture, innovative syllabus design, icebreaker activities, data on potential earnings of economics majors, and framing the course in terms of big ideas. Below, we describe how these techniques work so that readers gain a firm grasp of how to implement them in their courses.

2. A Review of the Literature on First Impressions

Think back to when you were in school. How long did it take you to size up a professor and figure out what you needed to do to pass the course? Did you know the first day how good a teacher was, or did it take part or all of the semester? Did you ever love a particular teacher and subsequently learn to love the material as a result? A broad swath of research indicates students’ assessment of teacher effectiveness occurs within the first few minutes of the first class and remains consistent with their assessment at the end of the course. In addition, this research also describes instructor characteristics that are positively correlated with higher teacher effectiveness. Let’s look at the findings in greater detail.

Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) focused on short snippets of nonverbal communication. Subjects viewed thirty-second silent videos of instructors. The impressions formed in these thin-slices significantly predicted end-of-semester teacher evaluations. Carney, et al. (2007) also focused on the accuracy of first impressions ranging from five seconds to three hundred seconds. They found that some characteristics such as extraversion, conscientiousness, and intelligence were judged moderately well after five-second exposures; however, openness and agreeableness required more exposure time to achieve similar levels of accuracy. The overall accuracy of the impression improved with longer exposure times up to sixty seconds. After that point, increased time was no longer relevant. Laws, et al. (2009) also examined how rapidly students formulate enduring impressions of the instructor, as measured by student evaluations. In a controlled study of psychology students they found that students form lasting impressions during the first class period, which persist until the end of the semester.

A separate facet of Ambady and Rosenthal’s (1993) work examined the correlation between specific positive traits of the instructors and end-of-semester course evaluations, as determined by undergraduate females who watched 30-second slices of video for each instructor. They found nine personal characteristics that were significantly correlated (coefficient in parenthesis): optimistic (.84),
confident (.82), dominant (.79), active (.77), enthusiastic (.76), likable (.73), warm (.67), competent (.56), and supportive (.55). From these results, a picture of the “ideal” instructor emerges, one who is optimistic, confident, active (does not stand behind a podium), and enthusiastic.

Morris, et al. (1996) specifically looked at fashion. Instructors who dressed professionally (as opposed to business casual or casual) received higher scores for competence. However, those dressed casually fared much better on being approachable. Female students were also found to be more aware than their male counterparts when it comes to fashion. Since instructors may be looking to create different first impressions, the findings do not indicate that a particular fashion choice is best.

Wilson, et al. (2009) found that handshakes on the first day of class matter, and effectiveness varies by gender. Shaking hands increased positive student impressions for female instructors but not male instructors. The researchers found students rated female professors who greeted them the first day of class with a handshake higher in skill and ability to motivate students than those who did not. The opposite effect occurred for male instructors.

Our brains are hard-wired for survival. Kahneman (2011) notes that humans experience two modes of cognition. The first mode is instinctive and fast, and it is designed to assess our surroundings quickly. The second mode is slow, and it allows us to observe and direct our attention and gather evidence for or against one idea or another. The literature on first impressions confirms that our instincts are right more often than not.

Finally, students often care more about the teacher than the subject matter. Consider Bain’s (2004) highly regarded work, What the Best College Teachers Do. He found that lesson plans and lecture notes matter less than the insights instructors bring to the subject matter and the amount of respect that they show for student learning. Across all disciplines, the best teachers know their subject matter, but they also know how to engage and challenge students and communicate their passion.

3. Suggestions for Making a Positive First Impression

Having established that first impressions matter in the previous section we offer suggestions for making a positive first impression in economics courses by sharing teaching techniques that we have successfully deployed. Just as if you were walking into a job interview, a positive first impression as an economics instructor requires purposeful preparation to convey those positive traits correlated with student impressions of skilled instructors. We hope this list helps you reflect on your own efforts and to try to identify the pedagogical techniques that resonate with your students.

3.1. Before Class Starts

One of the top traits correlated with positive end of course evaluations is enthusiasm. One of our favorite ways to share our enthusiasm for economics is to use the time before class to energize the atmosphere in the room so students are ready and excited to learn from the first day of the course and the start of every class thereafter.

3.1.1 Use Media to Start Class Early

Mateer and Rice (2007) pioneered the use of pre-class animated music featuring economic content. Their work (along with the work of others) is archived under Music for Econ on Critical Commons (O’Roark, 2015). Animations of popular music are synchronized so the music, lyrics, visuals and an economic interpretation are simultaneously shown. The animations are freely available to use. Choose the video that complements your lesson, and arrive in the classroom early with enough time to play it so that it ends when your class is set to begin. This technique focuses student attention before class, and it gives students a reason to be in class early. Once the animation ends, you can start class by turning the lights back up. You may choose to mention the song, or not, when you start class. Either way you will have your students’ attention.
It is not necessary to use animated music. Another equally effective technique involves playing a music video or short YouTube clip that relates to the subject you wish to discuss. Rather than tell students directly how it relates, we ask them to figure out for themselves how the song connects to economics. If this technique is regularly incorporated into the lesson, students begin to anticipate and look forward to this “game.”

By utilizing this time before class, you encourage students to arrive on time, and, more importantly, prime them for the learning that is about to occur. This technique teaches them to intentionally think about how what they encounter in their everyday lives relates to economics. As an added bonus, playing music before class also requires you to arrive early. Arriving early allows the instructor to address student questions, preload media you might want use that day, and make small talk with students. When students see that you care enough to be there early, it positively affects their impressions of you.

3.1.2 Prepare a Syllabus Students Want to Read

Your syllabus is an important part of the impression you make on the first day of the course. It is a vehicle to express your enthusiasm for the subject as well as your competence in organizing the course, two of the positive traits identified by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993). A syllabus transmits the essential course information, but very few syllabi do so in a compelling way that students want to read. A thorough reader will find our contact information, grading scale, make up policy, and course calendar - just like any other syllabus. They will also find an informal introduction to the course and personal information about why we enjoy teaching. In short, we want students to read the syllabus for the big picture, not the details. How do you get students to read a document that they see as “boring”? Use a layout that isn’t boring! Add color, pictures, and some design elements. With a few changes, you have a brochure to hand out instead of a white sheet. See Figure I.

![Figure I: Jazz up your syllabus.](image-url)
3.2. Communicate that People Personally Matter to You

Students are people too! Just like any individual, they value being known personally. Perhaps this is why traits like being likable, warm, and supportive are so highly correlated with positive instructor evaluations. In this section, we discuss ways you can personalize your course so that students feel more comfortable interacting with you and each other.

3.2.1 Names Count

In smaller classes, learning student names is crucial. You can use Facebook, a campus intranet, or take pictures of students with a nametag in order to learn names quickly. You can also ask students to turn in an introductory assignment that includes a personal biography and a photo of themselves – this allows you to learn more about your students’ interests.

In larger classes, learning every student name may not be possible. Don’t let this stop you from referring to students by name in one-on-one interactions. One technique that works well for us involves how we communicate with students when they have questions. For questions during the lecture, take a little extra time to ask the student their name and, if necessary, repeat their question loudly so others can hear. Then, if possible, refer back to the student’s question and name later in the lecture. For questions outside of class, we explicitly tell our students that we prefer to talk to them in person. On the first day, we point out that there are many ways to reach us, but we prefer to chat personally rather than through email. This is a very powerful signal that we are interested in meeting our students’ needs and not simply providing an answer. We mention that we get to class early, and we are happy to stay late to answer any questions that might come up. This gives us a chance to get to know our students, answer their questions in person, and follow up immediately as needed.

3.2.2 Leverage Social Media

In classes with 100 or more students, we deploy a Facebook group page for general questions and answers. Facebook personalizes communication since every post is associated with the user’s name. This also allows the instructor to communicate publicly with the entire class by responding to posts and liking comments. Facebook works best as a social engagement tool when you use it for all class communications, including reminders about assignments, exams, related article postings, poll questions, exam reviews and the like. It is important to establish a Facebook group on the first day of class to encourage a community of learners to develop over the course of the semester. Allowing students to collaborate on class work and debate questions and answers through Facebook helps bring the space to life, helps students get to know one another, and increases engagement.

3.2.3 Icebreakers

Icebreakers help instructors start the course on an optimistic note. Researchers have found that ice breakers can break down barriers in tough audiences (Chlup, and Collins, 2010; West, 1999) and build community (Eggleston and Smith, 2004). Ice breakers often radically change students’ expectations of an economics course for the better. What they may believe is going to be a dull or difficult class becomes active from the very beginning. Icebreakers show students that you want them to be actively involved in the class and what they have to contribute matters to you and those around them.

3.2.3.1 “Crusoe’s Island”

This activity helps students get to know one another and introduces them to economists’ obsession with Robinson Crusoe! Tell students they will be stranded on an island for one year with no hope of escape. What one thing will they bring with them? They should write this down, so they’re less likely to change it. In small classes, they introduce themselves and their item and then form teams of 4-7. In larger classes, they form teams first and then introduce themselves to the team. Give them a few
minutes to devise a survival plan with the items each one brought to the island. Then, have them choose a spokesperson to share their plan with the class. If you have a very large class, you can ask which team thinks they have the best plan and have just a few teams share. Depending on the time and number of students you have, you can play this game through several iterations to introduce different topics on the syllabus.

- From their original items, discuss subjective value. Also, examine the assumptions they made about the island and how that may change their valuations.
- Form groups based on similar items. Discuss marginal utility.
- Allow two teams on an island and discuss exchange value, trade, comparative advantage, & entrepreneurship.

This exercise only introduces them to some of the concepts that will be covered in class. Let them know you will be talking about each one in depth later on. When you get to a topic you talked about during this activity, remember to refer back to it so they can make the connection to a tangible example.

3.2.3.2 “Public Good Pizza”

As an icebreaker for an economic policy or public economics course, bring a few pizzas to class (for larger classes, fruit or bags of candy are more affordable). Let students help themselves. While they’re eating, have them introduce themselves. Food is an excellent catalyst to conversation. After they’ve had a few minutes to get to know each other, inform them that you will be providing this exact same refreshment for the rest of the course, because research has shown that well-nourished students learn better. However, you will need to be compensated, so you will charge each student $1 (or the appropriate sum), add it to their bill, and collect it at the end of the semester. Say this in all seriousness and watch their faces! Now, ask them what they think about this. Some will love the idea; some will hate it. Why? Answers usually include, “he ate more than me,” “I don’t like that kind,” “I’m not hungry,” etc. Use this object lesson to introduce the problems inherent in group decisions and determining public goods provision:

- What is the optimal quantity? Will there be enough, or will some go to waste?
- What kind of pizza will be ordered? How will this be determined?
- What is our objective and how will we determine if we have achieved it?
- What are the administrative costs – ordering, pickup, billing, etc.?
- Is there a way to eliminate free riders? What about forced riders?

3.3. Provide Motivation for Learning Economics

Since some students lack intrinsic motivation to learn, providing extrinsic motivation can help students appreciate the importance of economics. We do this in two ways, providing earnings data and using a classroom response system:

3.3.1 Earnings Data with an Economics Degree

Money matters. Making this point on the first day of class creates an expectation that the course material is worth learning. See Figure II.

Students want to make money, and economics majors earn more than many other majors. The real power of an economics degree is found by examining mid-career earnings, not starting salaries. The following data from Forbes and PayScale from 2012, came from an extensive survey of college graduates across many majors. The survey captures income data for early career (0-5 years on the job), early-to-mid-career (5-10 years on the job) and mid-career (10-20 years on the job). Economists have the second highest mid-career income in the survey, and, notably, they experience the largest gain in salary from the start of their career to mid-career. This tells us that the skill sets that economics majors acquire become more valuable through time. Economics salaries also exceed every other business-related...
major. These statistics are a compelling reason to consider majoring, minoring or taking additional courses in economics.

![Figure II: Mid-career earnings for economists are among the highest.](image)

### 3.3.2 Surveying Your Class

Personal response systems are a wonderful way to learn about your students and for students to learn about each other. Asking poll questions also gives every student a chance to participate in the life of the course. Because the first day sets the tone for the semester, we typically ask a couple of informational questions to get students accustomed to participating in the polling process. We begin by saying, “I’d like to learn a little bit about your interest in economics.” We then direct the students to a site called Poll Everywhere that allows them to use their cell phones to text in a response to a dedicated five-digit number[^3]. Students love to text and texting is taboo in many courses, so being encouraged to text and seeing the results live in class is a very powerful motivational tool that increases engagement. In Figure III we see that there are a wide variety of motivations for taking an introductory course in economics: a few students are quite excited about economics, many are looking forward to learning, some are looking to get a grade with the minimum amount of effort, and others are apathetic. This snapshot of student feelings gives you an opportunity to connect with your class by discussing how you organize different parts of your course with these constituencies in mind.

[^3]: There is a variety of polling software available with this functionality.
It is also beneficial to utilize polling to look at prior economic knowledge. For instance, you might choose to ask how many students have taken an economics course. For those without any prior exposure to economics, it can be eye opening to learn that many students have taken economics in high school. We like to follow up this question with an interesting topical question on opportunity cost or demand to illustrate that just because a large portion of the class has some exposure to economics does not mean that they are ready to answer college-level problems. We use polling strategically to engage students and assess learning – since these elements are a hallmark of our classes, we choose to do this from day one.

4. Future Research on this Subject

We believe that the suggestions from Section III improve our teaching evaluations, and that if you try one or more of these techniques, you will experience improvement as well. However, there is a difference between our assertion and proof. We invite readers who are interested in testing any of the suggestions to contact us. We would like to run a series of controlled studies to determine which suggestions are most influential in forming positive first impressions in economics courses.

5. Conclusion

Students enter courses with preconceived ideas about economics and expectations about what an economics class will be like, whether they’re excited about economics or they dread it. Making the first day memorable builds goodwill and will help your students settle into the course. The first impressions literature is a powerful reminder that the goodwill (or apathy) you create on the first day, lasts for the entire semester. To us, it seems like a good investment of time to start off every course on a positive note rather than having to work extra hard to overcome a poor first impression. Whether you make a positive first impression or not is just the beginning. Positive first impressions should be reinforced through continuous action on the part of the instructor. Likewise, poor first impressions may be improved by instructors willing to incorporate some of these suggestions into their teaching. We should strive to make a positive first impression as well as a lasting impression by treating every class like the first day.
References


