



# First Day Strategies

## Beyond the Podium Podcast

### Alexandra

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. I'm the host of the Beyond the Podium Podcast Series at the University of Florida where we laugh a little and learn a lot. The UF Podcast Series is on teaching and learning. And today's, is on first day of class strategies. Guests will offer their very best tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching with a little bit of humor.

Today's guests will share their start of semesters. How they can be both exciting and slightly terrifying at the same time. As a matter of fact, I know I've always harbored some very real worst case scenario teaching nightmares. I also know that all of us have had a first day or in some cases a first week filled with mishaps and challenges. Most of us have never shared these experiences with another soul just like Gillian Lord, Chair of Spanish and Portuguese here at the University of Florida.

### Gillian

I haven't told many people. I was in graduate school, it was maybe my second or third semester teaching. I still get a little apprehensive before the start of the semester. But those first couple of years I was terrified. And so I would go you know walk from my apartment to the classroom that I was scheduled to be in. And make sure how long it took and like see where the blackboard was. So I had everything planned out. I walked into the class, I forget I wrote my name something on the board, and I just went off in Spanish talking to them. And in a beginning language class you get a lot of blank stares anyway especially if you're in a foreign language. I just kept going. And they're all just kind of looking at me. And then the older gentleman walks in. And it ended up being a religion class. It was you have the nightmare of like showing up to class in your underwear naked. That was my nightmare. That was it. And so like I am so neurotic now about making sure. I'll check eight times before the class. This is where it is. This is right. And I'll walk in and I'll be like, this is Spanish right? And they're like yeah.

### Alexandra

Such misadventures inevitably make us feel deeply embarrassed even unqualified. But they're just part of the experience of learning to teach. And it's important to remember that they are just that-- part of the experience of learning as instructors as Melissa Johnson explains.

## Melissa

You're not going to get it right, and that's OK. It's not going to go perfectly. And that's OK. Go in, put your best foot forward. You'll make it. You will always have another chance. You can't really screw anybody up. No one's going to die because of this class. So it will be OK. I think that's a big thing-- is we tend to be perfectionists just like our students do. And being able to give yourself that grace to step back and say all right it's not perfect. And that's OK. Nobody died. It's all right.

## Alexandra

So what does a great first day look like? Not necessarily what you would imagine. It does not mean that every gadget works. And every plan comes to fruition perfectly. Nope. It simply means that we as instructors provide a positive experience for our students. LB Hannahs, Special Assistant to the Vice President of Student Affairs, share some thoughts on what a positive first day of class might feel like.

## L.B.

If I were to try to recall the good first class experiences that resonated for me, it's more of a feeling. And not necessarily it was this teacher or this class. It was those classes that when you walk in the door the instructor made you feel like a person before a student. And what I mean by that is there's a way to start a class that's very logistically minded. We have a syllabus to go over, here is all about me as a professor, and kind of centering the focus on the professor and the content. Which is your standard way of doing it so that they feel informed. But the ones that I remember that made me feel settled and less nervous about class were the ones where the focus was on the students, and making the environment as comfortable and natural as possible. And ways in which folks had done that would be taking the syllabus and setting it aside for a minute. Really sitting down with students or building a lesson plan around how can we get to know each other as people. Recognize the kind of the time and place that we're at. I'm thinking particularly the times where maybe I was a first year student or I was new to an institution, and feeling really uneasy about my place. The most memorable ones were folks really took the time and effort to make me feel more settled, more grounded, and seen. Rather than like here's what we've got to learn, here's me as a professor, let's go.

## Alexandra

So what does it take to be a great teacher from the start? Years of experience? Technical know how? Not really. According to Dr. Melanie Harris, who began her teaching career at an under-resourced school with significant teacher turnover, it simply takes determination. Determination

to come back for another day and to keep trying especially when faced with a challenging first day.

## Melanie

I worked in a school that I was the third teacher that was hired. I'm fresh out of college and ready to go to teach school. And the kids were coming in and sitting down. And they're like, so are you going to stay? And I said, you know what? We'll see. I'll meet you at graduation. We'll see which one of us makes it. And then we're like, OK. You know. So I mean there were fights in my room, and there were all kinds of things that happened. But and a lot of times I think I probably could have gotten hurt if I had not had some humor. But I loved it. And I lasted in that school for 21 years.

## Alexandra

So where to begin? Dr. Harris, currently faculty at the PK Yonge Developmental Research School suggests that the most important work is the time invested before the semester even begins.

## Melanie

So as a teacher I think nothing can be better than the work that you do by yourself planning and thinking. We're real blessed here at PK to do teacher inquiry. And I think that that has caused me to question what I do. Question my practice, which I didn't do until I came to PK. There's a wonderful opportunity to look at the work that you do day to day and analyze your effort. Decide if what you did, and what you said, and how you delivered the lesson for the day was that effective. And so then I think the preparation for getting-- I mean there's details for getting the room ready, and making sure your students are comfortable in the room. So you really have to look at how the children are going to sit, and how they're going to receive the information. But I think probably the most important work that a teacher can do is actually before they ever get to school. I think that they have to look at their curriculum and decide how they're going to lay it out, and the pacing that they're going to take to get through it. And what's going to be the most effective way to teach that material.

## Alexandra

Dr. Hector Perez, professor in the Institute of Food and Agriculture, makes a point of sharing about himself. Making it personal. Creating connections with his students. He considers it essential to creating a warm classroom environment.

## Hector

So depending on the size of the class, if it's a small class we'll go around and do introductions and share a little bit about ourselves. I used to for one class I would give them kind of my life story, my background, and show pictures of stuff that I do outside of work to let them know that I'm human. And you know that I'm not some kind of teaching robot. And this is all that I do. I also do a questionnaire where I try to get just basic background information-- class standing, what other courses they're taking, what are some of things I'd like to do outside of class. And then I'll pull from that information from each student and anonymously post it the next day in class. And say, here are the people that you have in class. Here's what they like. Here's what they like to do. So it lets them also see that there may be students with similar interests. And I think that's really helped out to make and foster those connections.

## Alexandra

Dr. Hector Perez brings students together by sharing his love of music.

## Hector

One of the things that I notice-- and this is consistent-- is that it seems like students are sometimes hesitant to approach their instructors. They think that they might be interfering with their day or they might be intimidated for some reason. But if you can share with them you know that your human side, I think it lets them know that if you're upfront with them, it lets them know that you're honest, you're there for them, you're willing to help out. And I think that goes a long way because not every student is going to come see you. But for those that might have questions, it might ease that fear a little bit. It might enhance some of the connections that you make with other students. What I'll do before class starts I'll have music playing on Pandora or one of those other streaming services. And it's interesting. I don't expect all students of this generation to know who Van Halen was or who some of these other bands. But some of them do. And they appreciate that music. And they like it. And they start saying oh, OK. So he likes music. He likes some of the same music I like. And I had one student in a year evaluation, compliment me on my music choices.

## Alexandra

Dr. Kim Moore, also professor in the Institute of Food and Agriculture, opens the door to conversations about topics like pets-- as she considers it a valuable community building tool.

## Kim

I asked the students to do a discussion post to introduce themselves. And one year, I don't know how we got onto the topic of pets, but every single post was a different picture of pets from the students around the state. So I got pictures of horses, cats, lizards, dogs. And it was really fun to see all these different animals and all these different pets because I started off with I have a german shepherd. And then it's like, oh, I love shepherds. And it kind of escalated from that. And kind of set this really fun community for the hole semester.

## Alexandra

It is just as important for the students to feel known as individuals. LB Hannahs suggests that providing an opportunity for students to feel valued and seen in a class by their instructor, by each other can dramatically impact the students learning and their overall experience at the University of Florida.

## L.B.

We hand them a syllabus that has lots of rules. Right? Like no cheating. Here's all the assignments we want you to do. Here's what you have to read. And we kind of say this is what you have to do. So to get a little buy in, and make students feel like they can have ownership of the classroom, like walk them through a process of shared ground rules around how you want to participate, how you want the professor to show up as a human in the classroom, how do you minimize power dynamics, really helps the students feel like they can participate in a way that they can show up as more a human rather than just like an empty vessel that's getting content dropped into them. And when students feel good, and safe, and seen in the classroom, they're going to show better students.

And then seek that in and other places on campus. It can only be like a rippling effect-- like I got this good experience. We hear this from students that have really good classroom experiences in certain parts on campus, and then they go to another classroom and they don't thrive as much. Or they're not seen as much and so they care less. Or feel like they're trying to get an A just to get an A rather than like actually participating in the learning process. So I think let's think about productivity and learning like more broadly. And even if you have an instructor that has not really thought about it, giving 10% or 15% more effort and attention to strategies around it I think would make a world of difference. You don't necessarily have to go from like not doing or not paying attention to 100%. That's like a giant leap. But each semester, how do you build in pieces and strategies that kind of address this issue and address the classroom environment more, and more, and more? And then students' capacity to take on more learning and more content is going to be bigger because they're open. They're not as they're not coming in with their walls up.

## Alexandra

Another way of making sure that students come ready to learn is by taking the time to get to know their names. Melanie Harris believes that knowing a student's name is essential to making students feel welcome, valued, and seen.

## Melanie

I think everyone, no matter what you teach, you need to know your children's names. And I don't care whether they're 25 or they're 5. It doesn't matter how old they are. The adult in the room needs to know every child's name. And so I think any kind of game that will help them learn each other's names is very helpful for them. Now, once again, I'm building a group that has to sing together. So not only is important for me—

## Alexandra

Melanie allows each student to select an adjective that describes them, and begins with the same letter as their first name.

## Melanie

So for example Scott might be super Scott. And then Scott has to have emotion. So he's like super like Superman. So different things like that that help them show me who they are that has nothing to do with music. But it helped me. I taught super Scott in the sixth grade, and now he's going into the 10th grade. And I probably will always remember super Scott because he was a really cool-- and he still is a really cool kid.

## Alexandra

Dr. Gillian Lord, works to create a first day experience that moves away from the norm-- the expected syllabus day. Instead, she engages her students in an authentic experience from day one.

## Gillian

I've tried over the last few years to get away from this expectation, mine and theirs, that you walk in, you do the syllabus, and you leave, and that's your first day. So sometimes I don't even go over the syllabus the first day. I mean it's online. It's available. But I want them more engaged

early on. It depends a lot on the level. Like in graduate classes it's hard because everyone knows everyone already. My undergraduate classes for example, the one I'm teaching this fall, I have one of those signature hunts. Find someone who. Which we do in lower language all the time, and it feels really childish. But it's related to the content of the course. And they'll kind of grumble at the beginning. But then by the end, they'll actually-- one of the questions on there is, if you know me from something else, or if you know somebody else in this class already. In Spanish obviously. So it gets them in the language. It gets them thinking about the content. But it feels more like we're in it together. When I do the syllabus, you know go over all of it, I will do it like a scavenger hunt kind of thing. They have a worksheet they have to do in groups. How many exams are there? Well, I don't usually give exams. But things like that. Like how many absences are allowed? Or what happens if you don't show up this day? And at least then they're kind of engaged as well. Instead of me just talking at them forever.

## Alexandra

Dr. Melissa Johnson, takes this a step further, and sends her students on a collective scavenger hunt in the community.

## Melissa

Last summer, I taught a civic engagement course for incoming freshmen. Because we have about 140 or so incoming freshmen who start over the summer-- with a six week summer term. And so I taught about 30 of them in the Civic Engagement class. And it was basically an introduction to Gainesville. And we only had six weeks for the class. So the very first class, we did the standard getting to know you, here's why this class is going to be about. And one of their big assignments for the semester was going to be this adventure quest where they would have to go around town and experience different aspects of Gainesville. And then map it on a shared class map. So in order to get them ready for that, about halfway through the first class I said, OK everyone here's the bus schedule. Your job now for the rest of class is to get downtown and back using the bus. And take a picture of yourself on the bus, take a picture of yourself downtown, and there you go. And none of these folks were from Gainesville. So I just threw them off the deep end the very first day. And they loved it.

It was a shared experience of what is going on. How do I ride the bus? What does this mean? Where do I even go to get on a bus? I don't know what downtown is? And they went together. And so it gave them a chance to get to know each other. It's showed them that the bus is not scary because we did it all within the class period. So it's not like we were making them late for another class or impacting the rest of the day. And the cool part of it was after that, every week I would have students talk about oh yeah, I took this bus. Or remember when we took the bus downtown, we got off at that spot? That's the one you do to go on this you know part of the project. So they were using it after that. But it wasn't scary after that point. I know at least one student from that class became one of her ambassadors who meets with prospective students on our weekly tours. And I have heard from many folks that ambassador continues to talk about the

time on their first day of class, Dr. Johnson made her get on a bus, and go downtown, and come back. So it still stands out in their minds.

## Alexandra

I know, we're all thinking these are the experts. It just comes naturally to them. How would I even start? But the truth is, it starts very simply.

## L.B.

Some of the most effective strategies are just really simple ones. Don't over think it. Show up like a human. And reduce the amount of barriers that folks in the classroom have to you as a professor, but the barriers that they have to each other.

## Alexandra

I can't promise that your first week will go off without a hitch, that everything will go smoothly, that there won't be any bumps in the road. As a matter of fact, it is far more likely that there will be several bumps in the road. Hector Perez found this out the hard way.

## Hector

I'm the type of guy that likes to have everything planned out ahead of time and ready to go. And I remember having everything ready to go. All the activities were planned out. All the specimens that I needed were ready to go. I had them on a cart. And I was wheeling the cart over to the classroom, and the wheel caught on something in the pavement-- dumped everything over. So I only had about 15 minutes to get to class. So I have like everything that I needed, was just scattered all over the floor. So I had to hurry up and pick that all up, try to wheel to the classroom, the classroom was locked. Nothing was ready to go in the classroom. The students were waiting outside. So I opened the doors, run in there, get everything ready to go. And I think the students must have thought I was a mad professor because I thought what my hair was out here. I thought I was slipping on banana peels trying to get everything ready to go. But once I was able to calm down, we started with introductions and everything kind of went smoothly from there. So that was kind of a shocking first foray into the classroom. But it really was neat because it really taught me that as long as you are ahead of the students by about five minutes, then you're OK. And they don't need to know that. As long as you have some plan in place-- even if things just totally go off the rails-- you can still recover and have a good productive classroom session. So yeah, that's the first memory that comes to mind is a tragic experience. We had fun with it. We turned it into something fun. It turned out to be a good day.



## Alexandra

Just remember, that a little fun goes a long way. Thank you for listening to the very first episode of the Beyond the Podium Podcast Series. For more tips, tools, strategies, and resources on teaching at the University of Florida, or to find out more about future episodes, visit the [teach.ufl.edu](http://teach.ufl.edu) page.