

COLLEGE STUDENT EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FIRST CLASS IN THE TERM

The first week of classes includes specific routines aimed to establish the educational relationship between teachers and their students. The choices to make are many. Should we comment in detail on the course outline? Should the learning process get under way? How do we get the students to become acquainted with each other? As is the case with many CEGEPs, Collège de Maisonneuve offers new teachers various training activities, including one on how to plan for the first class of term. In this training, relying on different theoretical perspectives, we discuss the implications of teachers' teaching-and-learning choices in relation to their students' expectations. But what are these expectations? To learn more, we surveyed 2,700 students at Collège de Maisonneuve at the end of the first week of classes during the fall 2010 term.

This article first sets out the bases underlying the discussion, in the field of education, about the importance of the first class of term in a higher-education context. Second, it reveals students's expectations regarding the first class of a course. We wish to emphasize at the outset that it is difficult to interpret the meaning students gave to the expression "I expect ...". Some students appeared to infer that it was a question of firm expectations while others appeared to respond in terms of hopes. Since both interpretations are possible, we are not in a position to decide. Whatever the case, we will show that students' expectations varied according to gender, program (pre-university or technical), and the term students were. To conclude, we discuss the consequences that certain student expectations could have for planning the first class.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The educational literature uniformly emphasizes the importance of properly preparing the first class of a course. The first meeting is said to give specific impetus to student motivation



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while clarifying the shape of the teacher-student relationship that will be most beneficial to academic success.

THE FIRST CLASS: A LEVER FOR STUDENT MOTIVATION

Some authors establish a connection between the role of the teacher as a "model" and student motivation. For instance, Viau states that "teachers must inspire their students by displaying great interest in their subject and in learning" (2009, p. 151). For example, in the first class of term, a science teacher who makes reference to a science exhibition she or he enjoyed or a French teacher who shares personal reading preferences projects an image of someone who cultivates an interest in the discipline which goes beyond the teaching of it. Viau notes that students often develop motivation for a particular field of knowledge after coming into contact with a passionate teacher. Proulx reports that students appreciate teachers sharing personal experiences that are relevant to the class. He feels that "teachers who take off their masks, who become involved, and who talk about themselves simply and with a sense of humour" (Proulx, 2009, p. 464) are more likely to create a good relationship climate.

In everyday life as well as in teaching and learning, the relationship takes off right from the first contact and first impressions influence subsequent events.

According to Aylwin, the first class provides students with relevant information about the course they are embarking on. For Aylwin, student motivation will depend on the answers the teacher provides to the following questions: "Where does this course fit within the program? What are the course's distinctive features? What are the areas of interest and the major issues?" Students must perceive the personal and lasting benefits of the course, that is, the "values of intrinsic motivation" (Aylwin, 1994, p. 25). As well, Proulx mentions the effect of the teacher's own engagement on student motivation in a course; addressing teachers, he advises as follows: "[T]o motivate students about the course, tell them that you yourself are motivated" (2009, p. 465).

In short, depending on how far teachers show that they are both interested in the subject and motivated to teach it, the first class can serve as a lever allowing teachers to act upon student motivation.



YOU DON'T GET A SECOND CHANCE TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Many authors also emphasize the importance of students' first impressions of the class and the teacher. Prigent argues that "it is based on these first impressions that students will (often unconsciously) decide whether to get involved" (1990, p. 167). After all, in everyday life as well as in teaching and learning, the relationship takes off right from the first contact and first impressions influence subsequent events. Aylwin believes that "it is during the first contact that students' images of various aspects of the course are formed and often become set" (Aylwin, 1994, p. 25). This is why the choices teachers make (introductions, content, duration, etc.) for the first class of the term count for so much.

DO THE INTRODUCTIONS!

The first class offers the opportunity to pave the way for the teachers and their students to get to know each other (Proulx, 2009; Prigent, 1990). Who are these students? What are their characteristics, their fields of interest? And in fact, the students are also impatient to become better acquainted with the teacher with whom they will be spending the coming weeks (Aylwin, 1994).

Teacher introduction

It wasn't just their knowledge that these teachers shared with us; it was the desire itself to learn. (Pennac, 2007, p. 268)

Is it useless to introduce oneself to the group during the first class? Since students like to know that they can count on their teacher, it would appear essential that teachers demonstrate their competencies, confidence, and enthusiasm (Proulx, 2009, p. 464). In their introductions, teachers convey a wealth of information, such as their fields of expertise, their areas of interest, their career paths, their pedagogical choices, and their expectations. As Prigent (1990, p. 167) writes, this allows them to "establish credibility with the students, who need to perceive the teacher's enthusiasm for the subject and accept the teacher's authority and competence." Prigent adds that what teachers reveal about themselves and their courses makes a lasting impression on their students.

The question "Why introduce oneself?" is usually followed by "How is it done?" An effective introduction begins with an overview of what motivated a teacher to specialize in their discipline; it draws an outline of the teacher's career path and reflects the teacher's personality, while allowing the teacher to display their allegiances (Aylwin, 1994). Furthermore, it

is marked by contagious enthusiasm (Prigent 1990) as well as featuring humour and being free from self-congratulation (Proulx, 2009).

Student introductions

Getting to know one's students has its uses. According to Aylwin, having the students each introduce themselves allows them to "break out of their isolation, reduce the stress of a first meeting, and start developing a feeling of belonging to the group" (1994, p. 29). This introduction can take various forms. If the students are not numerous, it is possible to gather information about them during a simple conversation; with larger groups, it is better to have them fill out short fact sheets (Prigent, 1990). This latter option may be combined with a brief introduction, to promote students' mutual getting-acquainted. As well, teachers who plan to use teamwork as a learning method should include a socializing activity in their first class (Proulx, 2009). In short, introductions by students and the teacher have as their main function the creation of a relationship climate that is conducive to learning (Proulx, 2009) and favourable to the blossoming of positive interpersonal relationships (Prigent, 1990).

Course introduction

It is important to devote time to introducing the course. One of the objectives of the first class consists in "informing students about the way the course is organized educationally" (Prigent, 1990, p. 168), that is, the course outline and how the course fits into the program. The first session should be used to "situate the course within the student's academic and professional training plan" (Prigent, 1990, p. 168). Students will be more interested if they understand the importance of the course as part of their education and if they can see its personal lasting benefits to them. Proulx concurs with this view and suggests establishing "concrete links between [the] course, the program it fits into, and the types of career paths that it allows the student to contemplate" (2009, p. 465).

We would add that this observation also applies to general education, in which teachers can draw attention to the links between the course and the student's program or civic education. The first class can also serve as an opportunity to learn students' expectations regarding the course and establish links between those expectations and the course content (Aylwin, 1994), without implying that the course will fulfill all expectations (Proulx, 2009). Every course has its portion of essential requirements that cannot be adapted to the choices of either the teacher or the students.



Once the place of the course within the program or the sequence of courses has been established, it is appropriate to examine how the course will unfold and the targeted competencies. The objectives of introducing the course outline are to organize the term and help students plan their terms. The ways teachers approach the introduction of the outline vary greatly. They range along a continuum that goes from the bald statement, “The course outline can be found on the Internet site for this course,” to an in-depth reading of the outline.

Clearly there are many ways to proceed. Thus Prégent recommends that the introduction be carried out in an interactive manner; while Proulx advises teachers not to get lost in an exhaustive reading, but rather to present the general objectives, the content, the teaching methods, and the assessment tools. At the end of this first class, students should have “a concrete, concise, and detailed idea of their tasks and responsibilities in the course that has just begun and of the type of support their teacher will offer them” (Aylwin, 1994, p.28).

DO WE GET THE LEARNING PROCESS UNDER WAY?

In terms of planning, there are two dilemmas that can influence the impression students will retain of the course as a whole: whether the learning should get under way in the first class; and whether the first class last the allotted time. Aylwin holds that “the style of one’s first class forms the main message that students will retain” (1994, p. 38). He notes the inconsistency in the message conveyed by some teachers who assert that the course content is heavy but do not make full use of the time available for the first meeting. The fact is, the first class should resemble subsequent classes, in both form and substance, even if it “cannot constitute an absolutely faithful image of the whole term” (Proulx, 2009, p. 460). The first class must stimulate students’ interest in the subject matter (Proulx, 2009; Prégent, 1990; Prégent & coll., 2009), a motivating factor that arises out of the perception students have of the value of classroom activities (Viau, 2009). To accomplish this, teachers can allude to the links between the course and the profession it relates to or to the importance of the competencies developed in the course in pursuing university studies.

Students particularly appreciate examples taken from daily life, anecdotes, and real-life cases that enable the learning process to begin without making “the first hour of class deadly boring” (Prégent, 1990, p. 169). Checking out the students’ prior knowledge, ideally in small groups in order to avoid putting them on the spot, is another attractive possibility. This type of strategy is designed to help students “gain confidence

in themselves and believe in their ability to succeed in the new course” (Aylwin, 1994, p. 36), two ways to impact their perceptions of their own competency (Viau, 2009).

AN IMPORTANT CLASS, BUT..

The first meeting, “a pivotal class” according to Proulx, sets the tone and lays the foundations for the educational relationship that is to develop. There is a lot at stake in this first class: it is important that teachers prepare for it carefully (Prégent & coll., 2009). However, Proulx cautions “those who unequivocally link the appeal and success of an entire term to how their first class goes» (1993, p. 220). For a teacher, the first class is already a source of stress; there is no need to add to it.

STUDENTS’ PREFERENCES

Teachers emphasize the fact that student expectations can sometimes contradict the principles of a pedagogy focused on active learning. Given that the educational relationship starts to form right from the first class of a course, what can be said about student expectations at this key moment? Are these expectations in keeping with the theoretical framework?

METHODOLOGY

To answer this question, we surveyed students at Collège de Maisonneuve at the end of the first week of classes in the fall term of 2010. There were a total of 2,764 students (37% male, 63% female), or 48% of the population registered in regular courses in 25 different programs or profiles, who shared with us their expectations regarding the first class of a course in a given term.

The survey, which was disseminated using the Omnivox computer platform, was online from August 27 to September 2, 2010. Presented on a single screen-page, it consisted of some ten statements. First came this introductory sentence and an accompanying checklist: “For me, an ideal first class has the following characteristics. (Check all the items which correspond to your expectations.)” A final question verified students’ degree of satisfaction with their first week. In addition, students were able to add comments on their answers. The data allow us to distinguish respondents according to gender, term, and program.¹

¹ Our thanks go to Anne-Cécile Hartemann and to Manon Gemme, technicians at Collège de Maisonneuve, for lending us a hand with this project.



RESULTS

The survey statements and the response rates are presented in Table 1. The statements break down into four groups, covering the themes of introductions (statements 1 to 3), the course outline (statements 4 and 5), assessments and how the course will unfold (statements 6 and 7), and the class plan, as regards getting learning under way and duration (statements 8 and 9). The results are in some ways rather surprising.

Statement	Response rate (n = 2764)
1. I expect the teacher to introduce herself of himself.	87.9%
2. I expect that students will introduce themselves.	33.0%
3. I expect that there will be an activity that allows students to interact with some other students in the group.	38.1%
4. I expect the teacher to comment on the course outline.	64.0%
5. I expect the teacher to explain the role of the course within the program.	57.7%
6. I expect the teacher to produce a clear description of the assessments planned for the course.	74.8%
7. I expect the teacher to clearly describe how the course will unfold (making reference to calendar dates).	70.2%
8. I expect the class to include the teaching of an initial portion of the subject matter.	20.0%
9. I expect the class to last the allotted time.	16.5%
In general, given my expectations for an ideal first class, I feel satisfied with my first week of classes (fall 2010).	Yes=74.5% Not entirely=24.3% Not at all=1.2%

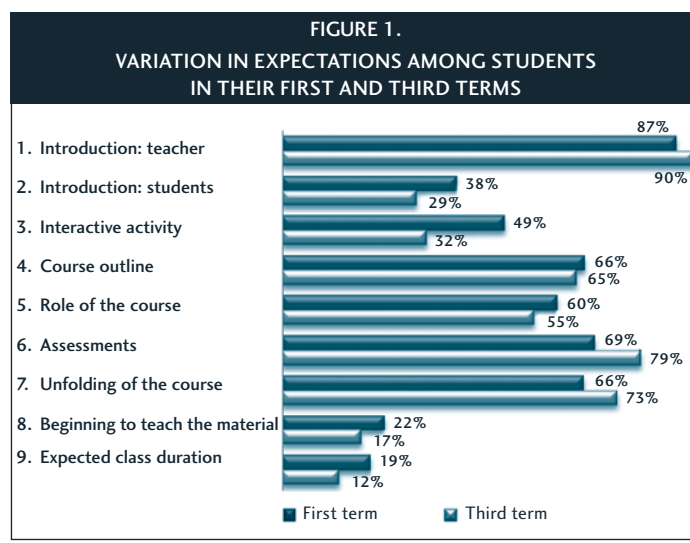
After the teacher introduction, Collège de Maisonneuve students' most highly prioritized expectations relate to their planning of their studies (assessments and unfolding of course). This first point suggests management strategies that could support academic motivation (Barbeau, Montini, and Roy, 1997). It may seem startling that expectations regarding the description of the course content and the way the course fits into the program of study outweigh those relating to establishing ties between students. The theme of making introductions, which we associate with an affective dimension, is thus less pronounced than themes associated with describing the course and the way assessment activities have been planned. Even the teacher introduction, which is the element eliciting the most salient positive result, is not an expectation shared by all students: slightly more than 10% of respondents did not tick off the relevant statement.

Finally, the data show that, according to the expectations of a majority of the students, the ideal first class should be cut short and should not include the teaching of an initial portion of the subject matter.

This portrait relates to hopes or firm expectations regarding the first meeting. It should not be interpreted as constituting a reference point for the first class, because several of its components conflict with established educational principles for supporting academic success. However, there is reason to believe it reflects a certain reality, because the majority of students said their first week of classes satisfied them in relation to their expectations for an ideal first class.

Variation in expectations according to term, program and gender

On the whole, students' expectations in their third and fifth terms² are similar and do not present any major divergences (between a 0.10-point and a 2.65-point spread). On the other hand, students' expectations in their first term present noteworthy differences (Figure 1). Thus nearly one in two students in their first term (n = 1078) expect some form of interactive activity which will allow for contact among students. This amounts to 17 percentage points more than for students in their third term (n = 942). Similarly, students in their first term expect their fellow students to introduce themselves (9-point spread) and that the first class will last the allotted time (7-point spread).



² Data for the second and fourth terms have not been examined, because they generally involved students whose path of studies does not align with that of the usual fall-term cohort; and also because their sample size was too small for their answers to be of statistical interest.



Conversely, third-term students have a greater expectation than do first-term students that assessments will be clearly presented (10-point spread) and the course's unfolding described (6.4-point spread).

The data also indicate that sector modulates student expectations (pre-university: $n = 1586$; technical: $n = 1158$). For example, students in technical studies in all terms report higher expectations with regard to an explanation of the role of the course within the program, but this was particularly so in the first term (15.6-point spread). Similarly, and especially in their first term, students in technical programs are more likely than those in the pre-university sector to expect teaching about the subject matter to begin in the first class (8.1-point spread). First-term students in technical programs more often mention the expectation that the first class will last the allotted time (6.1-point spread).

Students in the pre-university sector, on the other hand, stand out with regard to two statements. Especially in the third term, a higher proportion of these students indicate their expectation that the teacher will comment on the course outline (10.2-point spread) and will outline in detail the course's unfolding (10.5-point spread).

Finally, the data reveal that male and female students have very similar expectations. However, female students more than male manifest the expectation that the teacher will clearly describe the course's unfolding (9.5-point spread) and assessments (7.2-point spread).

In short, third-term students, especially those in the pre-university sector and especially girls, appear to have the expectation that teachers will clearly describe assessments and the course's unfolding. We could advance the hypothesis that these expectations reflect a concern with the R score.

Students enrolled in a technical program are more likely to expect that teachers will describe the place of the course in the program, that the teaching of the subject matter will begin as of the first class, and that the first class will last the allotted time. We could hypothesize here that these expectations reflect concerns about the purpose of the course and the program.

On the whole, however, over successive terms, fewer students expect that their peers will introduce themselves, that an interactive activity will take place, or that the first class will last for the whole period and include getting the learning process under way.

Supporting comments

In total, there are 107 respondents who provided comments with their answers. In these comments we find issues (e.g., academic organization) that do not relate to the topic under study but also a few themes that are missing from the list of statements. Thus some students express an expectation with regard to a presentation of rules for class management or information about the cost of the materials required and how to get them. Others underline the importance of taking first-term students into consideration: they expect to be supported in the transition from high school to college and to be informed about the way the college works. However, the comments focus mainly on reasserting or qualifying the positions expressed in the choice of answers. More specifically, five themes prevail throughout the comments: the teacher's personal qualities, getting the learning process under way, reading through the course outline, the duration of the first class, and student introductions.

First, students make a point of specifying their expectations regarding the teacher (27 comments). Though they want their teachers to introduce themselves, demonstrate their interest for the subject, and talk about their competencies and their career paths, it is mainly teachers' personal qualities that students take the time to enumerate: enthusiasm, dynamism, tolerance, availability... No fewer than some twenty desirable qualities reflect this concern by students about the person who will be teaching them. Associated with these more affective expectations are some references regarding a relaxed, even friendly, atmosphere that should characterize the first class of the course. Finally, mention is made of giving the students confidence about their success in the course.

Teachers must come to terms with some student expectations that do not entirely square with certain theoretical orientations.

The 21 comments relating to getting the learning process under way range from a categorical rejection of having to begin on the subject right from the first class to beginning the learning process in a gradual manner, without starting the course in a formal way. Several student suggestions illustrate expectations that the class should be neither too heavy nor too theoretical: provide a short introduction, a practical activity, a review or overview of concepts. Finally, students took this opportunity to express their need to receive clear and detailed explanations about the subject matter in order to be able to understand the class well and identify the difficulties usually encountered.



The 17 comments concerning the course outline are in agreement in recommending it be dealt within a summary form. Opinions on this subject are blunt and they criticize this exercise, which, according to the students, is “useless”, “boring” and “too long”. The students who hope for a “shortened” class, one that “lasts less long”, or one that ends “earlier” or “ahead of time”, do not provide any arguments to justify their wish (10 comments). One respondent specified that this first class should last less than one hour but 4 comments express the opposite view and suggest that it is a waste of time to “come in for half-hour classes”.

On another front, student introductions during the first class also elicited a comparatively high number of comments. Opinions are divided. According to students, student introductions must take place (4 comments) since they help build relationships and even increase the “motivation to go to class”. However, they also have certain negative aspects (3 comments): introductions can be stressful, but mainly they are superfluous, in particular in technical programs, according to students. Finally, this exercise is of even less interest if it is coupled with questions deemed superficial.

All in all, when they commented on their answers, survey respondents highlighted the desire to establish positive relationships with the teacher and their classmates, but they questioned activities deemed to be superfluous, such as the repetition of student introductions from one class to another or the reading of the course outline they have been given. They revealed that they were anxious about assessment based on what is taught in the first class, since they are “not always able to concentrate and have difficulty catching up on the contents of that class later”.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Teachers must come to terms with some student expectations that do not entirely square with certain theoretical orientations. For example, it is necessary to take advantage of the first class to establish contact – fine. However, the data indicate that it is important to take into account both the program and the term, for everything leads one to believe that, generally, the students know each other and their teachers by the time they start their third term, especially in the technical sector. The challenge would therefore be to find an appropriate way to establish the first contact.

The analysis suggests that, for students, the first class has a mainly utilitarian function, one related to information about assessment and to planning for the term. Expectations in this regard are heightened at the start of the third term, in the fall

session, in pre-university programs, and for female students. To use a figure of speech, this suggests that these students are more interested in mapping the course than in exploring its territory. On the other hand, those who do not express this expectation should be supported and receive explicit advice in order to incorporate these aspects into their strategies for managing their studies. Finally, expectations regarding the duration of the class, even if it is not clear just how short this first class should be, are rather revealing of a certain culture that is gradually taking hold among students. Should we dare to defeat this expectation and set the tone by incorporating meaningful learning activities in order to get the term under way gradually?

CONCLUSION

This in-house study can certainly not be generalized, but it does allow us to raise the question of the student perspective, an angle decidedly neglected in the theoretical documents we reviewed. Among the limitations of the study is the question of students’ interpretation of the statements. For example, what do they understand by “teaching an initial portion of the subject matter”? There may be a gap between their conception of this and the strategy adopted by the teacher. The fact is, many teachers consider that they actually do begin the learning process through their method of presenting the course outline... Furthermore, Collège de Maisonneuve has its own colour, just as its students, most of whom are enrolled in pre-university programs, have their own characteristics.

It remains up to individual teachers to draw their own conclusions with regard to how theoretical orientations and student expectations, based on the term and the program involved, should intersect: Do we go into detail about the course outline? Should we get the learning process under way? How should we have students become acquainted with each other?

Regardless of the context, the questions remain the same; but a better understanding of student expectations articulated with theoretical positions should enrich teachers’ reflections.

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