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# ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: THE KEY TO CREATING CONNECTIONS AND FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CLASS

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## **Abstract**

*How can professors create a more engaging environment in our classrooms while also helping students connect more deeply with the course material? Current research in education, psychology, and cognitive science has shown that students who experience a greater number of positive emotions like excitement and interest are also more cognitively activated and, as a result, engage more extensively with the course material. In this paper, I will discuss two methods I use on the first day of class to establish an encouraging, highly participatory environment that have proven effective during my 18 years of university teaching. Both strategies are centered on asking students specific types of questions that not only get them excited about the term ahead, but also acknowledge their role as collaborators in the course. The first involves creating a questionnaire that gathers both personal and academic information about each student. The second is to pose students questions that elicit their prior knowledge in the subject area. These two simple activities have a significant positive impact on student engagement, motivation, and learning for the rest of the term. I will also discuss how the concept of “positive emotional contagion” is an integral part of the success of the above methods. Simply put, we cannot underestimate the key role that a professor’s enthusiasm, confidence, supportiveness, and sense of humour play in their students’ learning process. The context of my teaching is in French language, culture, and film but these strategies can be adapted to be effective in any discipline.*

**Keywords**

*questions; engagement; emotional contagion*

First and foremost, I conceive of teaching as creating a classroom environment that is most conducive to student learning. Therefore, my main goal at the beginning of any new course is to create a positive connection with my students and establish a level of engagement in class that will set the tone for the rest of the term. Current research in education, psychology, and cognitive science has shown that students who experience a greater number of positive emotions like excitement and interest are also more cognitively activated and, as a result, engage with the course material more extensively. In this paper, I will discuss two methods I use on the first day of term to create a motivating, highly participatory learning environment that have proven successful during my 18 years of university teaching. Both strategies are centered on asking students specific types of questions—questions that not only make them enthusiastic about the course but perhaps more importantly, also demonstrate to them that I am more interested in their learning than I am about simply transmitting knowledge from my privileged position at the front of the classroom. The first strategy is to create a course questionnaire that gathers both personal and academic information. The second is to pose students questions that elicit their prior knowledge in the subject area. These two simple activities have a significant impact on student participation, motivation, and learning for the duration of the course. I will also discuss how the concept of “positive emotional contagion” is an integral part of the success of the above methods. Simply put, we cannot underestimate the key role that a professor’s enthusiasm, confidence, supportiveness, and sense of humour play in their students’ learning process.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that creating connection in any context is an inherently reciprocal activity. Many of us are quite adept at talking about ourselves at length but the key to creating genuine relationships is a sincere desire to learn about other people: we must show interest in others, their experiences, and what they bring to the table—and this includes our students. There is certainly considerable value in an instructor telling personal stories in class; this can be a very effective way to illustrate a point, infuse some humour into a lecture, or break down the student-professor barrier. I argue, however, that there is even greater value in getting to know our students—and this process starts on the first day of class. University instructors and students too often dismiss the importance of the first day of a new course. Over the years, however, I have put increasing importance on using the first class to establish the positive and engaging atmosphere that will not only get students excited about the course, but also be most beneficial to their learning. The context of my teaching is in French language, culture, and film but these strategies can be

adapted to be effective in any discipline.

### **Positive Emotional Contagion: Setting the Tone for the Term**

Creating the right conditions for optimal learning begins with an acknowledgement of the vital link between the professor's attitudes and behaviour at the front of the classroom and the impact these behaviours and attitudes have on student learning and motivation. Whether I am teaching language, literature, or film, I want students to immediately understand that my course is not about merely transmitting knowledge to them, it is about fostering their learning. As Ken Bain explains in *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004): "To benefit from what the best teachers do...we must embrace a different model, one in which teaching occurs only when learning takes place. Most fundamentally, teaching in this conception is creating those conditions in which most—if not all—of our students will realize their potential to learn" (p. 173). So when I begin the term by asking students questions about their lives—their past experiences, their future goals, the knowledge and curiosity they bring to the class—the dynamic shifts from one in which I tell them what they should know to one in which I acknowledge their worth as collaborators in the learning process. In other words, an important part of creating an ideal thinking environment for our students is to pay careful attention to how we make them feel.

In her illuminating study *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* (2016), Sarah Cavanagh compiles the most current research in education, psychology, and cognitive science to illustrate the important role emotions play in the teaching and learning process. She explains that "the brain systems involved in emotion and those involved in cognition are not, as traditional accounts would have had us believe, separate systems pulling us in opposite directions" (p. 3). In fact, she shows us that the neural mechanisms underlying emotion, motivation, and learning are intimately intertwined. She concludes, therefore, that the best way to truly motivate and educate our students is to target their emotions. Cavanagh's research was largely inspired by a powerful study by Buff, Reusser, Rakoczy, and Pauli (2011) that examines both the precursors and the results of positive emotions in the classroom. Their findings revealed that:

students who reported experiencing a greater number of positive emotions like excitement and interest during the lessons —were also more cognitively activated—they —engaged with the material more extensively.... More interest and curiosity led to greater engagement with the material, and it was this engagement with the material that led to better learning performance. (p. 6)

From this and other studies involving emotion, cognition, and motivation in the realm of education,

Cavanagh proposes that instructors use the concept of "positive emotional contagion" to our advantage in the university classroom. The nature and content of the activities we plan, therefore, are important, but so is the style in which we present them. She emphasizes characteristics such as enthusiasm, optimism, supportiveness, compassion, and having a sense of humour as being high on the list of affective states with beneficial effects on our teaching and relationships with students. Bain (2004) reminds us that "the best teaching is often both an intellectual creation and a performing art" (p. 174). This is indeed true, especially if you reject the transmission model of teaching in favour of one that prioritizes the richness and complexity of the student learning experience.

I will conclude this section with the proviso that in no way do I advocate an approach to education in which professors constantly coddle and placate their students. Creating an optimal environment for student learning does not rule out discomfort, conflict, or failure—these are also essential parts of the learning process. As university instructors, it is our job to challenge our students' beliefs and assumptions, to push them well outside their comfort zones, and to encourage growth and resilience. My contention is that using positive emotional contagion as a teaching strategy allows me to establish a classroom atmosphere where mutual trust and respect between me and my students opens up a space to better address those difficult topics, situations, and emotions. Let us now take a closer look at the two question strategies I use on the first day of class to set a positive tone for the term.

### **The Course Questionnaire**

The most significant part of my teaching responsibilities is in the realm of beginner and intermediate French language and culture. Students may be apprehensive at the beginning of any new course but language courses incite a particular kind of anxiety. Learning a new language makes us feel especially vulnerable and self-conscious because we are unable to express ourselves in a manner befitting the complex, intelligent adults that we are. Suddenly, we have returned to a stage of helplessness and frustration that we likely have not felt since childhood. Since speaking and actively participating are essential aspects of language learning, it is of the utmost importance to establish an open, respectful, we-are-all-in-this-together classroom vibe from Day One. Using a questionnaire on the first day of class explicitly demonstrates to my students that I genuinely want to know about their personal and academic background, what they hope to get out of the course, but also what they will personally contribute to it. This is an important first impression to make on our students. It enables them to see the course as a two-way contract between professor and student and reminds them that they will only get out of the course what they put into it. I am there to facilitate, encourage, and

redirect that process but students must also feel a sense of responsibility for their own learning. As students walk into the room on the first day of class I hand them a questionnaire that I have tailored specifically to the course. I give them at least 10 minutes to fill it out but also allow them to hand it in next class if they want to give more detailed answers. I will now go through the types of questions I ask students to answer, both personal and academic, as well as the specific goals I aim to achieve in doing so. The examples I give below are taken from a recent beginner French language course.

The first objective is to get their basic information: name, preferred email, faculty, major, minor, and year of study. These details can typically be found in your institution's online course management system but it can be quite cumbersome and time-consuming to compile it all in an easy to access format. Keeping track of this information has yielded some valuable insights. For example, knowing the faculty in which a student is enrolled has shown an interesting shift in the demographics of beginner French courses at Saint Mary's University over the last ten years or so. In previous decades, the majority were Faculty of Arts students but this is no longer the case. A significant number of our beginner French students now hail from the Sobey School of Business. This evidence could help our program with future course planning: if these students intend to continue their education in French, perhaps a course with a specific focus on French used in the business world could be warranted. An awareness of their year of study helps me to understand a number of issues. To start, students in their first year of university have very different needs and expectations compared with more senior students. This information also tells me which students are early enough in their academic career to consider doing a minor in French, as there is a rather strict regimen of prerequisite courses to take to attain that goal. Thanks to this small piece of information I now know where to target my recruitment efforts and am better able to understand a student's perspective and level of experience when they come to see me for help.

The next part of the questionnaire asks for details about a student's nationality and linguistic abilities and is divided into different sections for domestic and international students. When it comes to Canadian students, I ask the following questions: *Do you speak any other languages besides English? If yes, which one(s)? / Have you ever lived in a country other than Canada, or in a province other than Nova Scotia? / Do you have a Francophone or French-speaking parent?* The section for international students requests the following details: *What is your nationality? / What is your first language? / How would you rate your English language skills from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent)? / How long have you been in Canada?*

We have a very high percentage of international students at Saint Mary's University. In 2016, 30% of the student population at SMU was composed of international students from over 100 different countries (About Saint Mary's, n.d.). In one of my beginner French courses

during the Fall 2017 term, out of 35 students enrolled 32 were international students; 23 of those 35 were from China, and all 23 Chinese students were enrolled in the Sobey School of Business. This high percentage of international versus domestic students affects not only the classroom dynamic but also the teaching methods and strategies I use to encourage participation. For example, most Canadian students have been at least minimally exposed to the French language during their previous education. A number of domestic students also have some knowledge of French-Canadian culture, or have visited Quebec or another francophone region of Canada, or have francophone relatives. For instance, many Acadian students grew up with French-speaking grandparents but never learned the language themselves. On the other hand, the vast majority of international students who enroll in a beginner French course have never heard a word of the language in their entire lives—and many are also still trying to improve their linguistic skills in English. In a later section of the questionnaire, international students often reveal that they want to stay and work in Canada in the future and, since Canada is an officially bilingual country, they believe that they had best learn some French.

The next part of the questionnaire assesses a student's prior experience in the subject area and elaborates on the information given in the previous section on nationality and linguistic ability. The following questions go a long way in helping the instructor determine the best language level for each student: *What was your score on the online French Placement Test? / What French courses have you taken in the past? Include years of study in elementary/junior/high school, summer camps, trips to Francophone areas and university/college courses (including SMU).*

All students come to our courses with differing levels of experience, no matter the discipline, but this is an especially important detail for language courses. For example, despite the fact that the course title is "Beginners' French," an astounding number of students who are obviously not beginners enroll in this course every single year. A significant amount of time is spent at the start of each term weeding them out and insisting that they take a higher level course. It is an admittedly time-consuming and frustrating task, especially considering that the French program has an online placement test that is supposed to help students determine the most appropriate level for them. There are various reasons behind this disconnect but the main cause is that the placement test only tells us part of the story—we must also take each student's previous experience in French into account in conjunction with the test results. For example, many former French immersion students come to us with high levels of speaking proficiency but low levels of writing ability and a weak grasp of French grammar. Nevertheless, such students cannot be placed in the same course as those who have had absolutely no previous exposure to the French language. Another weakness of the test is that students can intentionally do poorly to gain entry to what they perceive as an easy course. If,

after reviewing their answers, I notice a significant discrepancy between their experience and the course level, I contact them individually so that we may discuss their placement in more detail.

It is also important to connect to a student's individual learning experiences and habits—past, present, and future—and the following questions seek to get at these more qualitative details. I also get some of the most interesting, revealing, and useful answers to these questions: *What did you like best about your past experiences and/or courses in French? / What did you like least? / What can your professor do to help your learning process? / How much time do you plan to spend each week studying French outside of class? / Are you interested in doing a Minor or a Certificate in French? / Are you interested in studying French in France for credit at SMU?*

The first two questions in this section (*What did you like best about your past experiences and/or courses in French? / What did you like least?*) are relatively new additions to my questionnaire but I have begun to collect some interesting data that will help me to better serve my students' needs. As for the third question (*What can your professor do to help your learning process?*), I have found that many students do not really know how to respond. Several put "I don't know" but others have mentioned specific things such as "Please have patience with me" or "Please force me out of my comfort zone." The fourth question (*How much time do you plan to spend each week studying French outside of class?*) serves as a reminder to students that their engagement in the course extends beyond the classroom. When I discuss this question with my students, I explain that they must commit to at least double the amount of time spent in class to studying outside of class and that consistent, frequent exposure to new vocabulary and grammar structures is the best learning strategy. Later in the term, if a student who is struggling comes to see me for help, I can take out their questionnaire and ask if they have been committing the weekly number of hours of study outside of class that they said they would. Finally, the last two questions (*Are you interested in doing a Minor or a Certificate in French? / Are you interested in studying French in France for credit at SMU?*) serve two functions. First, students might not be aware that minor and study abroad programs exist in French; second, if they show interest, I am better able to encourage and guide students towards their next steps.

The final queries are extra-academic but pertain to things that have a significant impact on a student's performance in the course: *How many other courses are you taking this term? / Do you have a part-time job? If yes, how many hours a week do you work? / Do you have other significant responsibilities besides your course work? / If you have any concerns or would like to add anything else to this questionnaire, please feel free to do so.*

It is essential to acknowledge that students have complicated lives outside our classrooms and their answers to these questions help me to respond more appropriately and compassionately



to requests for extensions, lack of participation, falling asleep in class, chronic lateness or absences, and so on. The last question about "any other concerns" is where students most often disclose very personal information about physical and mental health issues that they might otherwise never have mentioned. Many students tell me how relieved and grateful they are to be able to share these sensitive details with me, as I am now able to have a fuller picture of who they are and am aware of the obstacles they deal with on a daily basis. On a personal note, I have become more involved with campus-wide student mental health initiatives and am now certified in Mental Health First Aid so that I am better able to assist students in distress and direct them to campus and community mental health services. Finally, I ask students to sign and date the questionnaire so that they see it as a sort of contract between them and me.

As students give the questionnaires back to me, I personally welcome them to the course, while also confirming the correct pronunciation of their name. From these small gestures, students get the immediate impression that I want to know who they are and that I am glad they are in my class. Using the course questionnaire demonstrates to my students that I have a desire to know more about their academic and personal background and that I am personally invested in their learning process.

### **Ask Questions to Elicit Prior Knowledge**

Another engagement strategy that I always use on the first day of class is to ask students questions about what they already know—or think they know—about the subject area. In *How Learning Works: 7 Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching* (2014), Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovette, and Norman explain the critical role that prior knowledge plays in the learning process: "Faculty members need to assess the content, beliefs and skills students bring with them into courses and... use that information as both a foundation for new learning as well as an opportunity to intervene when content knowledge is inaccurate or insufficient" (p. 16). Similarly, in *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (2016), James Lang also advocates for what he calls "knowledge dumps" at the beginning of a new course:

Essentially, you want to ask your students to make individual and collective knowledge dumps, telling you everything they know about your subject before you begin teaching them. This not only will help you recognize and correct mistaken perceptions they have but will also activate whatever knowledge they currently have that you want to build on or reinforce. (p. 101)

There are different ways to approach this activity depending on the nature of the course,

but I always try to have some fun with it and use these questions to get students talking and sharing ideas, questioning cultural stereotypes, and even having a laugh at themselves (or at their professor). I also use this activity to introduce students to the way we will regularly approach the work we do in class throughout the term: small group work or discussion followed by reviewing answers or discussing ideas as a class. This method has proven highly successful in encouraging student participation and engagement with the course material as it allows them time and space to individually collect their thoughts, to confirm answers or clarify ideas with a partner or small group, then to come together as a class for a larger discussion. Even timid students who start the term avoiding eye contact and any attempt at participation gradually gain confidence throughout the course and end the term by consistently sharing their answers and ideas with their peers.

In the context of a beginner French course, for example, I often start off by posing the following question to the class: *What comes to mind when you think of France, French people, or French culture?* Even students who cannot yet speak the language have preconceived ideas about France (Romance! Fashion! Wine! Cheese!), or have perhaps travelled to Quebec (Montreal! Poutine!), or they have a favourite French-language movie (*Amélie! Bon Cop Bad Cop!*). Some students bring up cultural stereotypes; we discuss these ideas during the first class and then I refer back to that discussion during the term to determine whether these ideas are valid, problematic, or more complex than previously believed.

Other questions can be used to prompt discussion on the first day: *Where is French spoken in Canada? / Where is French spoken in the rest of the world?* These questions allow me to show various maps to give students a visual representation of how the French language is spread across the globe. This, in turn, allows me to briefly broach the complex topic of French colonialism, which they can learn more about in another course I teach entitled Francophone Cultures Through Film, and other courses offered in the French program. These few questions on the first day of class start the process by which students eventually understand that language and culture are intimately intertwined and learn to see our complex world through a different lens.

The last question I ask the class is: *What are some words or expressions that you already know in French?* Their answers to this question give me immediate feedback on their language level—and it becomes obvious if there are Francophone or French immersion students lurking in the shadows at the back of the classroom. I write down all their suggestions on the board, attempting to categorize them as I go; the most common things students share are greetings, simple questions, types of food, and place names (and swear words!). After sharing details about themselves on the questionnaire and thinking about answers to the above questions (individually, in small groups, then as a class), students are generally feeling more at ease—and, at this point, most students have

contributed in some way to the discussion. Finally, I use the last 15 minutes of class to introduce students to formal and informal greetings in French; students must then go around the room and introduce themselves to at least five other people in the class. When students leave the room at the end of our first class of the term, they are energized, enthusiastic, and already looking forward to the next one. I then constantly reinforce those positive emotions I generated on the first day of class throughout the rest of the term.

Fostering a classroom environment that enhances student learning does not have to be a daunting task. As Lang advocates in *Small Teaching* (2016), the goal is to find “an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices” (p. 5). Creating a course questionnaire and asking students questions about their prior knowledge in your subject area are two small but potent engagement strategies that are easy for any professor to implement on the first day of class. Showing enthusiasm for what we do and being compassionate about how we do it certainly takes more time and energy, but the positive emotional contagion payoff for our students is well worth it.

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